Prudhoe

BIRDS OF PREY

A Novel

BY THE AUTHOR OF

"LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET"

ETC. ETC. ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. III.

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Book the Sixth.

THE HEIRESS OF THE HAYGARTHS.

CHAPTER II.

VALENTINE'S RECORD CONTINUED.

October 15*th.* I left Omega-street for the city before noon, after a hasty breakfast with my friend Horatio, who was somewhat under the dominion of his black dog this morning, and far from pleasant company. I was not to present myself to the worthy John Grewter, wholesale stationer, before the afternoon; but I had no particular reason for staying at home, and I had a fancy for strolling about the old city quarter in which Matthew Haygarth's youth had been spent. I went to look at John-street, Clerkenwell, and dawdled about the immediate neighbourhood of Smithfield, thinking of the old fair-time, and of all the rioters and merrymakers, who now were so much or so little dust and ashes in city church-

yards, until the great bell of St. Paul's boomed three, and I felt that it might be a leisure time with Mr. Grewter.

I found the stationer's shop as darksome and dreary as city shops usually are, but redolent of that subtle odour of wealth which has a mystical charm for the nostrils of the penniless one. Stacks of ledgers, mountains of account-books, filled the dimly-lighted warehouse. Some clerks were at work behind a glass partition, and already the gas flared high in the green-shaded lamps above the desk at which they worked. I wondered whether it was a pleasant way of life theirs, and whether one would come to feel an interest in the barter of day-books and ledgers if they were one's daily bread. Alas for me! the only ledger I have ever known is the sainted patron of the northern racecourse. One young man came forward and asked my business, with a look that plainly told me that unless I wanted two or three gross of account-books I had no right to be there. I told him that I wished to see Mr. Grewter, and asked if that gentleman was to be seen.

The clerk said he didn't know; but his tone implied that, in his opinion, I could *not* see Mr. Grewter.

"Perhaps you could go and ask," I suggested.

"Well, yes. Is it old or young Mr. Grewter you want to see?"

"Old Mr. Grewter," I replied.

"Very well, I'll go and see. You'd better send in your card, though."

I produced one of George Sheldon's cards, which the clerk looked at. He made a little start as if an adder had stung him.

"You're not Mr. Sheldon?" he said.

"No, Mr. Sheldon is my employer."

"What do you go about giving people Sheldon's card for?" asked the clerk, with quite an aggrieved air. "I know Sheldon of Gray's Inn."

"Then I'm sure you've found him a very accommodating gentleman," I replied politely.

"Deuce take his accommodation! He nearly accommodated me into the Bankruptcy Court. And so you're Sheldon's clerk, and you want the

governor. But you don't mean to say that Grewter and Grewter are—"

This was said in an awe-stricken undertone. I hastened to reassure the stationer's clerk.

"I don't think Mr. Sheldon ever saw Mr. Grewter in his life," I said.

After this the clerk condescended to retire into the unknown antres behind the shop to deliver my message. I began to think that George Sheldon's card was not the best possible letter of introduction.

The clerk returned presently, followed by a tall, white-bearded man, with a bent figure, and a pair of penetrating gray eyes—a very promising specimen of the octogenarian.

He asked me my business in a sharp suspicious way that obliged me to state the nature of my errand without circumlocution. As I got farther away from the Rev. John Haygarth intestate, I was less fettered by the necessity of secrecy. I informed my octogenarian that I was prosecuting a legal investigation connected with a late inhabitant of that street, and that I had taken

the liberty to apply to him, in the hope that he might be able to afford me some information.

He looked at me all the time I spoke as if he thought I was going to entreat pecuniary relief—and I daresay I have something the air of a begging-letter writer. But when he found that I only wanted information, his hard gray eyes softened ever so little, and he asked me to walk into his parlour.

His parlour was scarcely less gruesome than his shop. The furniture looked as if its manufacture had been coeval with the time of the Meynells, and the ghastly glare of the gas seemed a kind of anachronism. After a few preliminary observations, which were not encouraged by Mr. Grewter's manner, I inquired whether he had ever heard the name of Meynell.

"Yes," he said; "there was a Meynell in this street when I was a young man—Christian Meynell, a carpet-maker by trade. The business is still carried on—and a very old business it is, for it was an old business in Meynell's time—but Meynell died before I married, and his name is

pretty well forgotten in Aldersgate-street by this time."

"Had he no sons?" I asked.

"Well, yes; he had one son, Samuel, a kind of companion of mine. But he didn't take to the business, and when his father died he let things go anyhow, as you may say. He was rather wild, and he died two or three years after his father."

"Did he die unmarried?"

"Yes. There was some talk of his marrying a Miss Dobberly, whose father was a cabinet-maker in Jewin-street; but Samuel was too wild for the Dobberlys, who were steady-going people, and he went abroad, where he was taken with some kind of fever and died."

"Was this son the only child?"

"No; there were two daughters. The younger of them married; the elder went to live with her—and died unmarried, I've heard say."

"Do you know whom the younger sister married?" I asked.

"No. She didn't marry in London. She

went into the country to visit some friends, and she married and settled down in those parts—wherever it might be—and I never heard of her coming back to London again. The carpet business was sold directly after Samuel Meynell's death. The new people kept up the name for a good twenty years; 'Taylor, late Meynell, established 1693,' that's what was painted on the board above the window — but they've dropped the name of Meynell now. People forget old names, you see, and it's no use keeping to them after they're forgotten."

Yes, the old names are forgotten, the old people fade off the face of the earth. The romance of Matthew Haygarth seemed to come to a lame and impotent conclusion in this dull record of dealers in carpeting.

"You can't remember what part of England it was that Christian Meynell's daughter went to when she married?"

"No. It wasn't a matter I took much interest in. I don't think I ever spoke to the young woman above three times in my life,

though she lived in the same street, and though her brother and I often met each other at the Cat and Salutation, where there used to be a great deal of talk about the war and Napoleon Bonaparte in those days."

"Have you any idea of the time at which she married?" I inquired.

"Not as to the exact year. I know it was after I was married; for I remember my wife and I sitting at our window upstairs one summer Sunday evening, and seeing Samuel Meynell's sister go by to church. I can remember it as well as if it was yesterday. She was dressed in a white gown and a green silk spencer. Yes—and I didn't marry my first wife till 1814. But as to telling you exactly when Miss Meynell left Aldersgate-street, I can't."

These reminiscences of the past seemed to exercise rather a mollifying influence upon the old man's mind, commonplace as they were. He ceased to look at me with sharp, suspicious glances, and he seemed anxious to afford me all the help he could.

"Was Christian Meynell's father called William?" I asked, after having paused to make some notes in my pocket-book.

"That I can't tell you; though, if Christian Meynell was living to-day, he wouldn't be ten years older than me. His father died when I was quite a boy; but there must be old books at the warehouse with his name in them, if they haven't been destroyed."

I determined to make inquiries at the carpet warehouse; but I had little hope of finding the books of nearly a century gone by. I tried another question.

"Do you know whether Christian Meynell was an only son, or the only son who attained manhood?" I asked.

My elderly friend shook his head.

"Christian Meynell never had any brothers that I heard of," he said; "but the parish register will tell you all about that, supposing that his father before him lived all his life in Aldersgate-street, as I've every reason to believe that he did."

After this I asked a few questions about the neighbouring churches, thanked Mr. Grewter for his civility, and departed.

I went back to Omega-street, dined upon nothing particular, and devoted the rest of my evening to the scrawling of this journal, and a tender reverie, in which Charlotte Halliday was the central figure.

How bitter poverty and dependence have made Diana Paget! She used to be a nice girl too.

Oct. 16th. To-day's work has been confined to the investigation of parish registers — a most wearisome business at the best. My labours were happily not without result. In the fine old church of St. Giles, Cripplegate, I found registries of the baptism of Oliver Meynell, son of William and Caroline Mary Meynell, 1768; and of the burial of the same Oliver in the following year. I found the record of the baptism of a daughter to the same William and Caroline Mary Meynell, and further on the burial of the said daughter, at five years of age. I also found the records of the baptism of

Christian Meynell, son of the same William and Caroline Mary Meynell, in the year 1772, and of William Meynell's decease in the year 1793. Later appeared the entry of the burial of Sarah, widow of Christian Meynell. Later still the baptism of Samuel Meynell; then the baptism of Susan Meynell; and finally, that of Charlotte Meynell.

These were all the entries respecting the Meynell family to be found in the registry. There was no record of the burial of Caroline Mary, wife of William Meynell, nor of Christian Meynell, nor of Samuel Meynell, his son; and I knew that all these entries would be necessary to my astute Sheldon before his case would be complete. After my search of the registries, I went out into the churchyard to grope for the family vault of the Meynells, and found a grim square monument, enclosed by a railing that was almost eaten away by rust, and inscribed with the names and virtues of that departed house. The burial-ground is interesting by reason of more distinguished company than the Meynells. John Mil-

ton, John Fox author of the Martyrology, and John Speed the chronologer, rest in this city churchyard.

In the hope of getting some clue to the missing data, I ventured to make a second call upon Mr. Grewter, whom I found rather inclined to be snappish, as considering the Meynell business unlikely to result in any profit to himself, and objecting on principle to take any trouble not likely to result in profit. I believe this is the mercantile manner of looking at things in a general way.

I asked him if he could tell me where Samuel Meynell was buried.

"I suppose he was buried in foreign parts," replied the old gentleman with considerable grumpiness, "since he died in foreign parts."

"O, he died abroad, did he? Can you tell me where?"

"No, sir, I can't," replied Mr. Grewter, with increasing grumpiness; "I didn't trouble myself about other people's affairs then, and I don't trouble myself about them now, and I don't

particularly care to be troubled about them by strangers."

I made the meekest possible apology for my intrusion, but the outraged Grewter was not appeased.

"Your best apology will be not doing it again," he replied. "Those that know my habits know that I take half-an-hour's nap after dinner. My constitution requires it, or I shouldn't take it. If I didn't happen to have a strange warehouseman on the premises, you wouldn't have been allowed to disturb me two afternoons running."

Finding Mr. Grewter unappeasable, I left him, and went to seek a more placable spirit in the shape of Anthony Sparsfield, carver and gilder, of Barbican.

I found the establishment of Sparsfield and Son, carvers and gilders. It was a low dark shop, in the window of which were exhibited two or three handsomely-carved frames, very much the worse for flies, and one oil-painting, of a mysterious and Rembrandtish character. The old-established air that pervaded almost all the shops

in this neighbourhood was peculiarly apparent in the Sparsfield establishment.

In the shop I found a mild-faced man of about forty engaged in conversation with a customer. I waited patiently while the customer finished a minute description of the kind of frame he wanted made for a set of proof engravings after Landseer; and when the customer had departed, I asked the mild-faced man if I could see Mr. Sparsfield.

"I am Mr. Sparsfield," he replied politely.

"Not Mr. Anthony Sparsfield?"

"Yes, my name is Anthony."

"I was given to understand that Mr. Anthony Sparsfield was a much older person."

"O, I suppose you mean my father," replied the mild-faced man. "My father is advanced in years, and does very little in the business nowadays; not but what his head is as clear as ever it was, and there are some of our old customers like to see him when they give an order."

This sounded hopeful. I told Mr. Sparsfield the younger that I was not a customer, and then

proceeded to state the nature of my business. I found him as courteous as Mr. Grewter had been disobliging.

"Me and father are old-fashioned people," he said: "and we're not above living over our place of business, which most of the Barbican tradespeople are nowadays. The old gentleman is taking tea in the parlour upstairs at this present moment, and if you don't mind stepping up to him, I'm sure he'll be proud to give you any information he can. He likes talking of old times."

This was the sort of oldest inhabitant I wanted to meet with—a very different kind of individual from Mr. Grewter, who doled out every answer to my questions as grudgingly as if it had been a five-pound note.

I was conducted to a snug little sitting-room on the first floor, where there was a cheerful fire and a comfortable odour of tea and toast. I was invited to take a cup of tea; and as I perceived that my acceptance of the invitation would be accounted a kind of favour, I said yes. The tea

was very weak, and very warm, and very sweet; but Mr. Sparsfield and his son sipped it with as great an air of enjoyment as if it had been the most inspiring of beverages.

Mr. Sparsfield the elder was more or less rheumatic and asthmatic, but a cheerful old man withal, and quite ready to prate of old times, when Barbican and Aldersgate-street were pleasanter places than they are to-day, or had seemed so to this elderly citizen.

"Meynell!" he exclaimed, "I knew Sam Meynell as well as I knew my own brother, and I knew old Christian Meynell almost as well as I knew my own father. There was more sociability in those days you see, sir. The world seems to have grown too full to leave any room for friendship. It's all push and struggle, and struggle and push, as you may say; and a man will make you a frame for five-and-twenty shillings that will look more imposing like than what I could turn out for five pound. Only the gold-leaf will all drop off after a twelvemonth's wear; and that's the way of the world nowadays. There's a deal of gilding,

and things are made to look uncommon bright; but the gold all drops off 'em before long."

After allowing the old man to moralise to his heart's content, I brought him back politely to the subject in which I was interested.

"Samuel Meynell was as good a fellow as ever breathed," he said; "but he was too fond of the tavern. There were some very nice taverns round about Aldersgate-street in those days; and you see, sir, the times were stirring times, and folks liked to get together and talk over the day's news, with a pipe of tobacco and a glass of their favourite liquor, all in a sociable way. Poor Sam Meynell took a little too much of his favourite liquor; and when the young woman that he had been keeping company with—Miss Dobberly of Jewin-street—jilted him and married a wholesale butcher in Newgate Market, who was old enough to be her father, Sam took to drinking, and neglected his business. One day he came to me and said, 'I've sold the business, Tony,'—for it was Sam and Tony with us, you see, sir,—'and I'm off to France.' This was soon after the battle of

Waterloo; and many folks had a fancy for going over to France now that they'd seen the back of Napoleon Bonaparte, who was generally alluded to in those days by the name of monster or tiger, and was understood to make his chief diet off frogs. Well, sir, we were all of us very much surprised at Sam's going to foreign parts; but as he'd always been wild, it was only looked upon as a part of his wildness, and we weren't so much surprised to hear a year or two afterwards that he'd drunk himself to death upon cheap brandy—odyvee as *they* call it, poor ignorant creatures—at Calais."

"He died at Calais?"

"Yes," replied the old man; "I forget who brought the news home, but I remember hearing it. Poor Sam Meynell died and was buried amongst the Mossoos."

"You are sure he was buried at Calais?"

"Yes, as sure as I can be of anything. Travelling was no easy matter in those days, and in foreign parts there was nothing but diligences, which I've heard say were the laziest-going

vehicles ever invented. There was no one to bring poor Sam's remains back to England, for his mother was dead, and his two sisters were settled somewhere down in Yorkshire."

In Yorkshire! I am afraid I looked rather sheepish when Mr. Sparsfield senior mentioned this particular county, for my thoughts took wing and were with Charlotte Halliday before the word had well escaped his lips.

"Miss Meynell settled in Yorkshire, did she?" I asked.

"Yes, she married someone in the farming way down there. Her mother was a Yorkshire woman, and she and her sister went visiting among her mother's relations, and never came back to London. One of them married, the other died a spinster."

"Do you remember the name of the man she married?"

"No," replied Mr. Sparsfield, "I can't say that I do."

"Do you remember the name of the place she went to—the town or village, or whatever it was?"

"I might remember it if I heard it," he responded thoughtfully; "and I ought to remember it, for I've heard Sam Meynell talk of his sister Charlotte's home many a time. She was christened Charlotte, you see, after the Queen. I've a sort of notion that the name of the village was something ending in Cross, as it might be Charing Cross, or Waltham Cross."

This was vague, but it was a great deal more than I had been able to extort from Mr. Grewter. I took a second cup of the sweet warm liquid which my new friends called tea, in order to have an excuse for loitering, while I tried to obtain more light from the reminiscences of the old frame-maker.

No more light came, however. So I was fain to take my leave, reserving to myself the privilege of calling again on a future occasion.

Oct. 18*th.* I sent Sheldon a statement of my Aldersgate-street researches the day before yesterday, and had a long interview with him yesterday morning. He went carefully through the information I had collected, and approved my labours.

"You've done uncommonly well, considering the short time you've been at the work," he said; "and you've reason to congratulate yourself upon having your ground all laid out for you, as my ground has never been laid out for me. The Meynell branch seems to be narrowing itself into the person of Christian Meynell's daughter and her descendants, and our most important business now will be to find out when, where, and whom she married, and what issue arose from such marriage. This I think you ought to be able to do."

I shook my head rather despondingly.

"I don't see any hope of finding out the name of the young woman's husband," I said, "unless I can come across another oldest inhabitant, gifted with a better memory for names and places than my obliging Sparsfield, or my surly Grewter."

"There are the almshouses," said Sheldon; "you haven't tried them yet."

"No; I suppose I must go in for the almshouses," I replied, with the sublime resignation of the pauper, whose poverty must consent to anything; "though I confess that the prosiness of

the almshouse intellect is almost more than I can endure."

"And how do you know that you mayn't get the name of the place out of your friend the carver and gilder?" said George Sheldon; "he has given you some kind of clue in telling you that the name ends in Cross. He said he should know the name if he heard it; why not try him with it?"

"But in order to do that, I must know the name myself," replied I, "and in that case I shouldn't want the aid of my Sparsfield."

"You are not great in expedients," said Sheldon, tilting back his chair, and taking a shabby folio from a shelf of other shabby folios. "This is a British gazetteer," he said, turning to the index of the work before him. "We'll test the ancient Sparsfield's memory with every Cross in the three Ridings, and if the faintest echo of the name we want still lingers in his feeble old brain, we'll awaken it." My patron ran his finger-nail along one of the columns of the index.

"Just take your pencil and write down the

names as I call them," he said. "Here we are—Aylsey Cross; and here we are again—Bowford Cross, Callindale Cross, Huxter's Cross, Jarnam Cross, Kingborough Cross." Then, after a careful examination of the column, he exclaimed, "Those are all the crosses in the county of York; and it will go hard with us if you or I can't find the descendants of Christian Meynell's daughter at one of them. The daughter herself may be alive, for anything we know."

"And how about the Samuel Meynell who died at Calais? You'll have to find some record of his death, won't you? I suppose in these cases one must prove everything."

"Yes, I must prove the demise of Samuel," replied the sanguine genealogist; "that part of the business I'll see to myself, while you hunt out the female branch of the Meynells. I want an outing after a long spell of hard work; so I'll run across to Calais and search for the register of Samuel's interment. I suppose somebody took the trouble to bury him, though he was a stranger in the land."

"And if I extort the name we want from poor old Sparsfield's recollection?"

"In that case you can start at once for the place, and begin your search on the spot. It can't be above fifty years since this woman married, and there must be some inhabitant of the place old enough to remember her.—O, by the bye, I suppose you'll be wanting more cash for expenses," added Mr. Sheldon, with a sigh.

He took a five-pound note from his pocket-book, and gave it to me with a piteous air of self-sacrifice. I know that he is poor, and that whatever money he does contrive to earn is extorted from the necessities of his needier brethren. Some of this money he speculates upon the chances of the Haygarthian succession, as he has speculated his money on worse chances in the past. "Three thousand pounds!" he said to me, as he handed me the poor little five-pound note; "think what a prize you are working for, and work your hardest. The nearer we get to the end, the slower our progress seems to me; and yet it has been very rapid progress, considering all things."

So sentimental have I become, that I thought less of that possible three thousand pounds than of the fact that I was likely to go to Yorkshire, the county of Charlotte's birth, the county where she was now staying. I reminded myself that it was the largest shire in England, and that of all possible coincidences of time and place, there could be none more unlikely than the coincidence that would bring about a meeting between Charlotte Halliday and me.

"I know that for all practical purposes I shall be no nearer to her in Yorkshire than in London," I said to myself; "but I shall have the pleasure of fancying myself nearer to her."

Before leaving George Sheldon, I told him of the fragmentary sentences I had heard uttered by Captain Paget and Philip Sheldon at the Lawn; but he pooh-poohed my suspicions.

"I'll tell you what it is, Valentine Hawkehurst," he said, fixing those hard black eyes of his upon me as if he would fain have pierced the bony covering of my skull to discover the innermost

workings of my brain, "neither Captain Paget nor my brother Phil can know anything of this business, unless you have turned traitor and sold them my secrets. And mark me, if you have, you've sold yourself and them into the bargain: my hand holds the documentary evidence, without which all your knowledge is worthless."

"I am not a traitor," I told him quietly, for I despise him far too heartily to put myself into a passion about anything he might please to say of me, "and I have never uttered a word about this business either to Captain Paget or to your brother. If you begin to distrust me, it is high time you should look out for a new coadjutor."

I had my Sheldon, morally speaking, at my feet in a moment.

"Don't be melodramatic, Hawkehurst," he said; "people sell each other every day of the week, and no one blames the seller, provided he makes a good bargain. But this is a case in which the bargain would be a very bad one."

After this I took my leave of Mr. Sheldon. He was to start for Calais by that night's mail,

and return to town directly his investigation was completed. If he found me absent on his return, he would conclude that I had obtained the information I required and started for Yorkshire. In this event he would patiently await the receipt of tidings from that county.

I went straight from Gray's Inn to Jewin-street. I had spent the greater part of the day in Sheldon's office, and when I presented myself before my complacent Sparsfield junior, Sparsfield senior's tea and toast were already in process of preparation: and I was again invited to step upstairs to the family sitting-room, and again treated with that Arcadian simplicity of confidence and friendliness which it has been my fate to encounter quite as often in the heart of this sophisticated city as in the most pastoral of villages. With people who were so frank and cordial I could but be equally frank.

"I am afraid I am making myself a nuisance to you, Mr. Sparsfield," I said; "but I know you'll forgive me when I tell you that the affair I'm engaged in is a matter of vital importance to

me, and that your help may do a great deal towards bringing matters to a crisis."

Mr. Sparsfield senior declared himself always ready to assist his fellow creatures; and was good enough further to declare that he had taken a liking to me. So weak had I of late become upon all matters of sentiment, I thanked Mr. Sparsfield for his good opinion, and then went on to tell him that I was about to test his memory.

"And it ain't a bad un," he cried cheerily, clapping his hand upon his knee by way of emphasis. "It ain't a bad memory, is it, Tony?"

"Few better, father," answered the dutiful Anthony junior. "Your memory's better than mine, a long way."

"Ah," said the old man with a chuckle, "folks lived different in my day. There weren't no gas and there weren't no railroads, and London tradespeople was content to live in the same house from year's end to year's end. But now your tradesman must go on his foreign tours, like a prince of the royal family, and he must go here and go there; and when he's been everywhere,

he caps it all by going through the Gazette. Folks stayed at home in my day; but they made their fortunes, and they kept their health, and their eyesight, and their memory, and their hearing, and many of 'em have lived to see the next generation making fools of themselves."

"Why, father," cried Anthony junior, aghast at this flood of eloquence, "what an oration!"

"And it ain't often I make an oration, is it, Tony?" said the old man, laughing. "I only mean to say that if my memory's pretty bright, it may be partly because I haven't frittered it away upon nonsense, as some folks have. I've stayed at home and minded my own business, and left other people to mind theirs. And now, sir, if you want the help of my memory, I'm ready to give it."

"You told me the other day that you could not recall the name of the place where Christopher Meynell's daughter married, but you said you should remember it if you heard it, and you also said that the name ended in Cross."

"I'll stick to that," replied my ancient friend. "I'll stick to that."

"Very well then. It is a settled thing that the place was in Yorkshire?"

"Yes, I'm sure of that too."

"And that the name ended in Cross?"

"It did, as sure as my name is Sparsfield."

"Then in that case, as there are only six towns or villages in the county of York the names of which end in Cross, it stands to reason that the place we want must be one of those six."

Having thus premised, I took my list from my pocket and read aloud the names of the six places, very slowly, for Mr. Sparsfield's edification.

"Aylsey Cross—Bowford Cross—Callindale Cross—Huxter's Cross—Jarnam Cross—Kingborough Cross."

"That's him!" cried my old friend suddenly.

"Which?" I asked eagerly.

"Huxter's Cross; I remember thinking at the time that it must be a place where they sold things, because of the name Huxter, you see, pro-

nounced just the same as if it was spelt with a cks instead of an x. And I heard afterwards that there'd once been a market held at the place, but it had been done away with before our time. Huxter's Cross; yes, that's the name of the place where Christopher Meynell's daughter married and settled. I've heard it many a time from poor Sam, and it comes back to me as plain as if I'd never forgotten it."

There was an air of conviction about the old man which satisfied me that he was not deceived. I thanked him heartily for his aid as I took my leave.

"You may have helped to put a good lump of money in my pocket, Mr. Sparsfield," I said; "and if you have, I'll get my picture taken, if it's only for the pleasure of bringing it here to be framed."

With this valedictory address I left my simple citizens of Barbican. My heart was very light as I wended my way across those metropolitan wilds that lay between Barbican and Omega-street. I am ashamed of myself when I remember the

foolish cause of this elation of mind. I was going to Yorkshire, the county of which my Charlotte was now an inhabitant. My Charlotte! It is a pleasure even to write that delicious possessive pronoun—the pleasure of poor Alnascher, the crockery-seller, dreaming his day-dream in the eastern market-place.

Can anyone know better than I that I shall be no nearer Charlotte Halliday in Yorkshire than I am in London? No one. And yet I am glad my Sheldon's business takes me to the woods and wolds of that wide northern shire.

Huxter's Cross—some heaven-forgotten spot, no doubt. I bought a railway time-table on my way home to-night, and have carefully studied the bearings of the place amongst whose mouldy records I am to discover the history of Christopher Meynell's daughter and heiress.

I find that Huxter's Cross lies off the railroad, and is to be approached by an obscure little station—as I divine from the ignominious type in which its name appears—about sixty miles northward of Hull. The station is called Hid-

ling; and at Hidling there seems to be a coach which plies between the station and Huxter's Cross.

Figure to yourself again, my dear, the heir-at-law to a hundred thousand pounds vegetating in the unknown regions of Huxter's Cross cum Hidling, unconscious of his heritage!

Shall I find him at the plough-tail, I wonder, this mute inglorious heir-at-law? or shall I find an heiress with brawny arms meekly churning butter? or shall I discover the last of the Meynells taking his rest in some lonely churchyard, not to be awakened by earthly voice proclaiming the tidings of earthly good fortune?

I am going to Yorkshire—that is enough for me. I languish for the starting of the train which shall convey me thither. I begin to understand the nostalgia of the mountain herdsman: I pine for that northern air, those fresh pure breezes blowing over moor and wold—though I am not quite clear, by the bye, as to the exact nature of a wold. I pant, I yearn for Yorkshire. I, the cockney, the child of Temple Bar, whose

cradle-song was boomed by the bells of St. Dunstan's and St. Clement's Danes.

Is not Yorkshire my Charlotte's birthplace? I want to see the land whose daughters are so lovely.

CHAPTER III.

ARCADIA.

November 1st. This is Huxter's Cross, and I live here. I have lived here a week. I should like to live here for ever. O, let me be rational for a few hours, while I write the record of this last blissful week; let me be reasonable, and business-like, and Sheldon-like for this one wet afternoon, and then I may be happy and foolish again. Be still, beating heart! as the heroines of Minerva-press romances were accustomed to say to themselves on the smallest provocation. Be still, foolish, fluttering, schoolboy heart, which has taken a new lease of youth and folly from a fair landlord called Charlotte Halliday.

Drip, drip, drip, O rain! "The day is dark and cold and dreary, and the vine still clings to the mouldering wall; and with every gust the

dead leaves fall:" but thy sweet sad verse wakes no responsive echo in my heart, O tender Transatlantic poet, for my heart is light and glad—recklessly glad—heedless of to-morrow—forgetful of yesterday—full to the very brim with the dear delight of to-day.

And now to business. I descend from the supernal realms of fancy to the dry record of commonplace fact. This day week I arrived at Hidling, after a tedious journey, which, with stoppages at Derby and Normanton, and small delays at obscurer stations, had occupied the greater part of the day. It was dusk when I took my place in the hybrid vehicle, half coach, half omnibus, which was to convey me from Hidling to Huxter's Cross. A transient glimpse at Hidling showed me one long straggling street and a square church-tower. Our road branched off from the straggling street, and in the autumn dusk I could just discover the dim outlines of distant hills encircling a broad waste of moor.

I have been so steeped in London that this wild barren scene had a charm for me which it

could scarcely possess for others. Even the gloom of that dark waste of common land was pleasant to me. I shared the public vehicle with one old woman, who snored peacefully in the remotest corner, while I looked out at the little open window and watched the darkening landscape.

Our drive occupied some hours. We passed two or three little clusters of cottages and homesteads, where the geese screamed and the cocks crowed at our approach, and where a few twinkling tapers in upper windows proclaimed the hour of bed-time. At one of these clusters of habitation, a little island of humanity in the waste of wold and moor, we changed horses, with more yo-oh-ing and come-up-ing than would have attended the operation in a civilised country. At this village I heard the native tongue for the first time in all its purity; and for any meaning which it conveyed to my ear I might as well have been listening to the patois of agricultural Carthage.

After changing horses, we went up hill, with perpetual groanings, and grumblings, and grindings, and whip-smacking and come-up-ing, for an

indefinite period; and then we came to a cluster of cottages, suspended high up in the sharp autumn atmosphere as it seemed to me; and the driver of the vehicle came to my little peephole of a window, and told me with some slight modification of the Carthaginian patois that I was "there."

I alighted, and found myself at the door of a village inn, with the red light from within shining out upon me where I stood, and a battered old sign groaning and creaking above my head. For me, who in all my life had been accustomed to find my warmest welcome at an inn, this was to be at home. I paid my fare, took up my carpet-bag, and entered the hostelry.

I found a rosy-faced landlady, clean and trim, though a trifle floury as to the arms and apron. She had emerged from a kitchen, an old-fashioned chamber with a floor of red brick; a chamber which was all in a rosy glow with the firelight, and looked like a Dutch picture, as I peeped at it through the open doorway. There were the most picturesque of cakes and loaves heaped on a

wooden bench by the hearth, and the whole aspect of the place was delicious in its homely comfort.

"O," I said to myself, "how much better the northern winds blowing over these untrodden hills, and the odour of home-made loaves, than the booming bells of St. Dunstan's, and the greasy steam of tavern chops and steaks!"

My heart warmed to this Yorkshire and these Yorkshire people. Was it for Charlotte's sake, I wonder, that I was so ready to open my heart to everybody and everything in this unknown land?

A very brief parley set me quite at ease with my landlady. Even the Carthaginian patois became intelligible to me after a little experience. I found that I could have a cosy, cleanly chamber, and be fed and cared for upon terms that seemed absurdly small, even to a person of my limited means. My cordial hostess brought me a meal which was positively luxurious: broiled ham and poached eggs, such as one scarcely hopes to see out of a picture of still life; crisp brown cakes fresh from that wonderful oven whose door I had seen yawning open in the Flemish interior below;

strong tea and cream—the cream that one reads of in pastoral stories.

I enjoyed my banquet, and then opened my window and looked out at the still landscape, dimly visible in the faint starlight.

I was at the top of a hill—the topmost of an ascending range of hills—and to some minds that alone is rapture; to inhale the fresh night air was to drink deeply of an ethereal beverage. I had never experienced so delicious a sensation since I had stood on the grassy battlements of the Château d'Argues, with the orchards and gardens of sunny Normandy spread like a carpet below my feet.

But this hill was loftier than that on which the feudal castle rears its crumbling towers, and the landscape below me was wilder than that verdant Norman *paysage*.

No words can tell how I rejoiced in this untrodden region—this severance from the Strand and Temple Bar. I felt as if my old life was falling away from me—like the scales of the lepers that were cleansed by the Divine Healer. I felt myself worthier to love, or even to be loved by,

the bright true-hearted girl whose image fills my heart. Ah, if Heaven gave me that dear angel, I think my old life, my old recklessness, my old want of principle, would drop away from me altogether, and the leper would stand forth cleansed and whole. Could I not be happy with her here, among these forgotten hills, these widely scattered homesteads? Could I not be happy dissevered eternally from billiard-room and kursaal, race-ground and dancing-rooms? Yes, completely and unreservedly happy—happy as a village curate with seventy pounds a year and a cast-off coat, supplied by the charity of a land too poor to pay its pastors the wage of a decent butler—happy as a struggling farmer, though the clay soil of my scanty acres were never so sour and stubborn, my landlord never so hard about his rent—happy as a pedlar, with my pack of cheap tawdry wares slung behind me, and my Charlotte tramping gaily by my side.

I breakfasted next morning in a snug little parlour behind the bar, where I overheard two

carters conversing in the Carthaginian patois, to which I became hourly more accustomed. My brisk cheery landlady came in and out while I took my meal; and whenever I could detain her long enough, I tried to engage her in conversation.

I asked her if she had ever heard the name of Meynell; and after profound consideration she replied in the negative.

"I don't mind hearing aught of folks called Meynell," she said, with more or less of the patois, which I was beginning to understand; "but I haven't got mooch memory for nee-ams. I might have heard o' such folks, and not minded t' nee-am."

This was rather dispiriting; but I knew that if any record of Christian Meynell's daughter existed at Huxter's Cross, it was in my power to discover it.

I asked if there was any official in the way of a registrar to be found in the village; and found that there was no one more important than an old man who kept the keys of the church.

The registers were kept in the vestry, my landlady believed, and the old man was called Jonas Gorles, and lived half a mile off, at the homestead of his son-in-law. But my landlady said she would send for him immediately, and pledged herself to produce him in the course of an hour.

I told her that I would find my way to the churchyard in the mean time, whither Mr. Gorles could follow me as soon as convenient.

The autumnal morning was fresh and bright as spring, and Huxter's Cross seemed the most delightful place on earth to me, though it is only a cluster of cottages, relieved by one farm-house of moderate pretensions, my hostelry of the Magpie, a general shop, which is also the post-office, and a fine old Norman church, which lies away from the village, and bears upon it the traces of better days. Near the church there is an old granite cross, around which the wild flowers and grasses grow rank and high. It marks the spot where there was once a flourishing market-place; but all mortal habitations have vanished, and the

Huxter's Cross of the past has now no other memorial than this crumbling stone.

The churchyard was unutterably still and solitary. A robin was perched on the topmost bar of the old wooden gate, singing his joyous carol. As I approached, he hopped from the gate to the low moss-grown wall, and went on singing as I passed him. I was in the humour to apostrophise skylark or donkey, or to be sentimental about anything in creation, just then; so I told my robin what a pretty creature he was, and that I would sooner perish than hurt him by so much as the tip of a feather.

Being bound to remember my Sheldon even when most sentimental, I endeavoured to combine the meditative mood of a Hervey with the business-like sharpness of a lawyer's-clerk; and while musing on the common lot of man in general, I did not omit to search the mouldering tombstones for some record of the Meynells in particular.

I found none; and yet, if the daughter of Christian Meynell had been buried in that church-

yard, the name of her father would surely have been inscribed upon her tombstone. I had read all the epitaphs, when the wooden gate creaked on its hinges, and admitted a wizen little old man —one of those ancient meanderers who seem to have been created on purpose to fill the post of sexton.

With this elderly individual I entered the church of Huxter's Cross, which had the same mouldy atmosphere as the church at Spotswold. The vestry was an icy little chamber, which had once been a family vault; but it was not much colder than Miss Judson's best parlour; and I endured the cold bravely while I searched the registries of the last sixty years.

I searched in vain. After groping amongst the names of all the nonentities who had been married at Huxter's Cross since the beginning of the century, I found myself no nearer the secret of Charlotte Meynell's marriage. And then I reflected upon all the uncertainties surrounding that marriage. Miss Meynell had gone to Yorkshire to visit her mother's relations, and had mar-

ried in Yorkshire; and the place which Anthony Sparsfield remembered having heard of in connection with that marriage was Huxter's Cross. But it did not by any means follow that the marriage had taken place at that obscure village. Miss Meynell might have been married at Hull, or York, or Leeds, or at any of the principal places of the county. With that citizen class of people marriage was a grand event, a solemn festivity; and Miss Meynell and her friends would have been likely to prefer that so festive an occasion should be celebrated anywhere rather than at that forgotten old church among the hills.

"I shall have to search every register in Yorkshire till I light upon the record I want," I thought to myself, "unless Sheldon will consent to advertise for the Meynell marriage certificate. There could scarcely be danger in such an advertisement, as the connection between the name of Meynell and the Haygarth estate is only known to ourselves."

Acting upon this idea, I wrote to George Sheldon by that afternoon's post, urging him

to advertise for descendants of Miss Charlotte Meynell.

Charlotte! dear name, which is a kind of music for me. It was almost a pleasure to write that letter, because of the repetition of that delightful noun.

The next day I devoted to a drive round the neighbourhood in a smart little dogcart, hired on very moderate terms from mine host. I had acquainted myself with the geography of the surrounding country; and I contrived to visit every village-church within a certain radius of Huxter's Cross. But my inspection of mildewed old books, and my heroic endurance of cold and damp in mouldy old churches, resulted in nothing but disappointment.

I returned to my "Magpie" after dark, a little disheartened and thoroughly tired, but still very well pleased with my rustic quarters and my adopted county. My landlord's horse had shown himself a very model of equine perfection.

Candles were lighted and curtains drawn in my cosy little chamber, and the table creaked

beneath one of those luxurious Yorkshire teas which might wean an alderman from the coarser delights of turtle or conger-eel soup and venison.

At noon the following day a very primitive kind of postman brought me a letter from Sheldon. That astute individual told me that he declined to advertise, or to give any kind of publicity to his requirements.

"If I were not afraid of publicity, I should not be obliged to pay you a pound a week," he remarked with pleasing candour, "since advertisements would get me more information in a week than you may scrape together in a twelvemonth. But I happen to know the danger of publicity, and that many a good thing has been snatched out of a man's hands just as he was working it into shape. I don't say that this could be done in my case; and you know very well that it could not be done, as I hold papers which are essential to the very first move in the business."

I perfectly understand the meaning of these remarks, and I am inclined to doubt the existence of those important papers. Suspicion is a funda-

mental principle in the Sheldon mind. My friend George trusts me because he is obliged to trust me,—and only so far as he is obliged,—and is tormented more or less by the idea that I may at any moment attempt to steal a march upon him.

But to return to his letter:

"I should recommend you to examine the registries of every town or village within, say, thirty miles of Huxter's Cross. If you find nothing in such registries, we must fall back upon the larger towns, beginning with Hull, as being nearest to our starting-point. The work will, I fear, be slow, and very expensive for me. I need scarcely again urge upon you the necessity of confining your outlay to the minimum, as you know that my affairs are desperate. It couldn't well be lower water than it is with me, in a pecuniary sense: and I expect every day to find myself aground.

"And now for my news. I have discovered the burial-place of Samuel Meynell, after no end of trouble, the details of which I needn't bore you

with, since you are now pretty well up in that sort of work. I am thankful to say I have secured the evidence that settles for Samuel, and ascertained by tradition that he died unmarried. The *onus probandi* would fall upon anyone purporting to be descended from the said Samuel, and we know how uncommonly difficult said person would find it to prove anything.

"So, having disposed of Samuel, I came back to London by the next mail; Calais in the month of November not being one of those wildly gay watering-places which tempt the idler. I arrived just in time to catch this afternoon's post; and now I look impatiently to your Miss Charlotte Meynell of Huxter's Cross.—Yours, &c. G. S."

I obeyed my employer to the letter; hired my landlord's dogcart for another day's exploration; and went further afield in search of Miss Charlotte's marriage-lines. I came home late at night, —this time thoroughly worn out,—studied a railway guide with a view to my departure, and decided on starting for Hull by a train that would

leave Hidling station at four o'clock on the following afternoon.

I went to bed tired in body and depressed in spirit. Why was I so sorry to leave Huxter's Cross? What subtle instinct of the brain or heart made me aware that the desert region amongst the hills held earth's highest felicity for me?

The next morning was bright and clear. I heard the guns of sportsmen popping merrily in the still air as I breakfasted before an open window, while a noble sea-coal fire blazed on the hearth opposite me. There is no stint of fuel at the Magpie. Everything in Yorkshire seems to be done with a lavish hand. I have heard Yorkshiremen called mean. As if meanness could exist in the hearts of my Charlotte's countrymen! My own experience of the county is brief; but I can only say that my friends of the Magpie are liberality itself, and that a Yorkshire tea is the very acme of unsophisticated bliss in the way of eating and drinking. I have dined at Philippe's; I know every dish in the *menu* of the Maison Dorée; but if I am to make my life a burden

beneath the dark sway of the demon dyspepsia, let my destruction arrive in the shape of the ham and eggs, the crisp golden-brown cakes and undefiled honey, of this northern Arcadia.

I told my friendly hostess that I was going to leave her, and she was sorry. She was sorry for me, the wanderer. I can picture to myself the countenance of a London landlady if informed thus suddenly of her lodger's departure, and her suppressed mutterings about the ill-convenience of such a proceeding.

After breakfast I went out to take my own pleasure. I had done my duty in the matter of mouldy churches and mildewed registries; and I considered myself entitled to a holiday during the few hours that must elapse before the starting of the hybrid vehicle for Hidling.

I sauntered past the little cluster of cottages, admiring their primitive aspect, the stone-crop on the red-tiled roofs, that had sunk under the weight of years. All was unspeakably fresh and bright; the tiny panes of the casements twinkled in the autumn sunlight, birds sang, and hardy

red geraniums bloomed in the cottage windows. What pleasure or distraction had the good housewives of Huxter's Cross to lure them from the domestic delights of scrubbing and polishing? I saw young faces peeping at me from between snow-white muslin curtains, and felt that I was a personage for once in my life; and it was pleasant to feel oneself of some importance even in the eyes of Huxter's Cross.

Beyond the cottages and the post-office there were three roads stretching far away over hill and moorland. With two of those roads I had made myself thoroughly familiar; but the third remained to be explored.

"So now for 'fresh fields and pastures new,'" I said to myself as I quickened my pace, and walked briskly along my unknown road.

Ah, surely there is some meaning in the fluctuations of the mental barometer. What but an instinctive consciousness of approaching happiness could have made me so light-hearted that morning? I sang as I hastened along that undiscovered road. Fragments of old Italian serenades

and barcarolles came back to me as if I had heard them yesterday for the first time. The perfume of the few lingering wild-flowers, the odour of burning weeds in the distance, the fresh autumn breeze, the clear cold blue sky,—all were intensely delicious to me; and I felt as if this one lovely walk were a kind of renovating process, from which my soul would emerge cleansed of all its stains.

"I have to thank George Sheldon for a great deal," I said to myself, "since through him I have been obliged to educate myself in the school of man's best teacher, Solitude. I do not think I can ever be a thorough Bohemian again. These lonely wanderings have led me to discover a vein of seriousness in my nature which I was ignorant of until now. How thoroughly some men are the creatures of their surroundings! With Paget I have been a Paget. But a few hours' *tête-à-tête* with Nature renders one averse from the society of Pagets, be they never so brilliant."

From moralising thus, I fell into a delicious day-dream. All my dreams of late had moved to

the same music. How happy I could be if Fate gave me Charlotte and three hundred a year! In sober moods I asked for this much of worldly wealth, just to furnish a nest for my bird. In my wilder moments I asked Fate for nothing but Charlotte.

"Give me the bird without the nest," I cried to Fortune; "and we will take wing to some trackless forest where there are shelter and berries for nestless birds. We will imitate that delightful bride and bridegroom of Parisian Bohemia, who married and settled in an attic, and when their stock of fuel was gone fell foul of the staircase that led to their bower, and so supplied themselves merrily enough till the staircase was all consumed, and the poor little bride, peeping out of her door one morning, found herself upon the verge of an abyss.

"And then came the furious landlord, demanding restitution. But close behind the landlord came the good fairy of all love-stories, with all the sands of Pactolus in her pockets. Ah, yes, there is always a providence for true lovers."

I had passed away by this time from the barren moor to the regions of cultivation. The trimly-cut hedges on each side of the way showed me that my road now lay between farm lands. I was outside the boundary of some upland farm. I saw sheep cropping trefoil in a field on the other side of the brown hedgerow, and at a distance I saw the red-tiled roof of a farm-house.

I looked at my watch, and found that I had still half-an-hour to spare; so I went on towards the farm-house, bent upon seeing what sort of habitation it was. In a solitary landscape like this, every dwelling-place has a kind of attraction for the wayfarer.

I went on till I came to a white gate, against which a girlish figure was leaning.

It was a graceful figure, dressed in that semi-picturesque costume which has been adopted by women of late years. The vivid blue of a bodice was tempered by the sober gray of a skirt, and a bright-hued ribbon gleamed among rich tresses of brown hair.

The damsel's face was turned away from me,

but there was something in the carriage of the head, something in the modelling of the firm full throat, which reminded me of——

But then, when a man is over head and ears in love, everything in creation reminds him more or less of his idol. Your pious Catholic gives all his goods for the adornment of a church; your true lover devotes his every thought to the dressing up of one dear image.

The damsel turned as my steps drew near, loud on the crisp gravel. She turned, and showed me the face of Charlotte Halliday.

I must entreat posterity to forgive me, if I leave a blank at this stage of my story. "There are chords in the human heart which had better not be wibrated," said Sim Tappertit. There are emotions which can only be described by the pen of a poet. I am not a poet; and if my diary is so happy as to be of some use to posterity as a picture of the manners of a repentant Bohemian, posterity must not quarrel with my shortcomings in the way of sentimental description.

CHAPTER IV.

IN PARADISE.

We stood at the white gate talking to each other, my Charlotte and I. The old red-tiled roof which I had seen in the distance sheltered the girl I love. The solitary farm-house which it had been my whim to examine was the house in which my dear love made her home. It was here, to this untrodden hillside, that my darling had come from the prim modern villa at Bayswater. Ah, what happiness to find her here, far away from all those stockbroking surroundings—here, where our hearts expanded beneath the divine influence of Nature!

I fear that I was coxcomb enough to fancy myself beloved that day we parted in Kensington-gardens. A look, a tone—too subtle for definition—thrilled me with a sudden hope so bright,

that I would not trust myself to believe it could be realised.

"She is a coquette," I said to myself. "Coquetry is one of the graces which Nature bestows upon these bewitching creatures. That little conscious look, which stirred this weak heart so tumultuously, is no doubt common to her when she knows herself beloved and admired, and has no meaning that can flatter my foolish hopes."

This is how I had reasoned with myself again and again during the dreary interval in which Miss Halliday and I had been separated. But, O, what a hardy perennial blossom hope must be! The tender buds were not to be crushed by the pelting hailstones of hard common sense. They had survived all my philosophical reflections, and burst into sudden flower to-day at sight of Charlotte's face. She loved me, and she was delighted to see me. That was what her radiant face told me; and could I do less than believe the sweet confession? For the first few moments we could scarcely speak to each other, and then we began to converse in the usual commonplace strain.

She told me of her astonishment on seeing me in that remote spot. I could hardly confess to having business at Huxter's Cross, so I was fain to tell my dear love a falsehood, and declare that I was taking a holiday "up at the hills."

"And how did you come to choose Huxter's Cross for your holiday?" she asked naïvely.

I told her that I had heard the place spoken of by a person in the city—my simple-minded Sparsfield to wit.

"And you could not have come to a better place," she cried, "though people do call it the very dullest spot in the world. This was my dear aunt Mary's house — papa's sister, you know. Grandpapa Halliday had two farms. This was one, and Hyley farm the other. Hyley was much larger and better than this, you know, and was left to poor papa, who sold it just before he died."

Her face clouded as she spoke of her father's death. "I can't speak about that without pain even now," she said softly, "though I was only nine years old when it happened. But one can suffer a great deal at nine years old."

And then, after a little pause, she went on to speak of her Yorkshire home.

"My aunt and uncle Mercer are so kind to me; and yet they are neither of them really related to me. My aunt Mary died very young, when her first baby was born, and the poor little baby died too; and uncle Mercer inherited the property from his wife, you see. He married again after two years, and his second wife is the dearest, kindest creature in the world. I always call her aunt, for I don't remember poor papa's sister at all; and no aunt that ever lived could be kinder to me than aunt Dorothy. I am always so happy here," she said; "and it seems such a treat to get away from the Lawn—of course I am sorry to leave mamma, you know," she added, parenthetically—"and the stiff breakfasts, and Mr. Sheldon's newspapers that crackle, crackle, crackle so shockingly all breakfast-time; and the stiff dinners, with a prim parlour-maid staring at one all the time, and bringing one vegetables that one doesn't want if one only ventures to breathe a little louder than usual. Here it is Liberty Hall. Uncle Joe—he is aunt Dorothy's

husband—is the kindest creature in the world, just the very reverse of Mr. Sheldon in everything. I don't mean that my stepfather is unkind, you know. O, no, he has always been very good to me—much kinder than I have deserved that he should be. But uncle Joe's ways are *so* different. I am sure you will like him; and I am sure he will like you, for he likes everybody, dear thing. And you must come and see us very often, please, for Newhall farm is open house, you know, and the stranger within the gates is always welcome."

Now my duty to my Sheldon demanded that I should scamper back to Huxter's Cross as fast as my legs would carry me, in order to be in time for the hybrid vehicle that was to convey me to Hidling station; and here was this dear girl inviting me to linger, and promising me a welcome to the house which was made a paradise by her presence.

I looked at my watch. It would have been impossible for me to reach Huxter's Cross in time for the vehicle. Conscience whispered that I could hire my landlord's dogcart and a boy to

drive me to Hidling; but the whispers of conscience are very faint; and love cried aloud, "Stay with Charlotte: supreme happiness is offered to you for the first time in your life. Fool that would reject so rare a gift!"

It was to this latter counsellor I gave my ear. My Sheldon's interests went overboard; and I stayed by the white gate, talking to Charlotte, till it was quite too late to heed the reproachful grumblings of conscience about that dogcart.

My Charlotte—yes, I boldly call her mine now—my dear is great in agriculture. She enlightened my cockney mind on the subject of upland farms, telling me how uncle and aunt Mercer's land is poor and sandy, requiring very little in the way of draining, but producing by no means luxuriant crops. It is a very picturesque place, and has a certain gentlemanlike air with it pleasing to my snobbish taste. The house lies in a tract of open grass-land, dotted here and there by trees, and altogether of a park-like appearance. True that the mild and useful sheep rather than the stately stag browses on that greensward, and few

carriages roll along the winding gravel road that leads to the house.

I felt a rapturous thirst for agricultural knowledge as I listened to my Charlotte. Was there a vacancy for hind or herdsman on Newhall farm, I wondered. What is the office so humble I would not fill for her dear sake? O, how I sighed for the days of Jacob, that first distinguished usurer, so that I might serve seven years and again seven years for my darling!

I stayed by the white gate, abandoning all thought of my employer's behests, unconscious of time—unconscious of everything except that I was with Charlotte Halliday, and would not have resigned my position to be made Lord Chancellor of England.

Anon came uncle Joe, with a pleasant rubicund visage beaming under a felt hat, to tell Lotta that dinner was ready. To him I was immediately presented.

"Mr. Mercer, my dear uncle Joseph—Mr. Hawkehurst, a friend of my stepfather's," said Charlotte.

Two or three minutes afterwards we were all three walking across the park-like sward to the hospitable farm-house; for the idea of my departing before dinner seemed utterly preposterous to this friendly farmer.

Considered apart from the glamour that for my eyes must needs shine over any dwelling inhabited by Charlotte Halliday, I will venture to say that Newhall farm-house is the dearest old place in the world. Such delightful old rooms, with the deepest window-seats, the highest mantelpieces, the widest fireplaces possible in domestic architecture; such mysterious closets and uncanny passages; such pitfalls in the way of unexpected flights of stairs; such antiquated glazed corner-cupboards for the display of old china!—everything redolent of the past.

In one corner a spinning-wheel, so old that its spindle might be the identical weapon that pierced Princess Sleeping Beauty's soft white hand; in another corner an arm-chair that must have been old-fashioned in the days of Queen Anne; and O, what ancient flowered chintzes, what capacious

sofas, what darling mahogany secretaries and bureaus, with gleaming brazen adornments in the way of handles!—and about everything the odour of rose-leaves and lavender.

I have grown familiar with every corner of the dear old place within the last few days, but on this first day I had only a general impression of its antiquated aspect and homely comfort.

I stayed to dine at the same unpretending board at which my Charlotte had sat years ago, elevated on a high chair, and as yet new to the use of knives and forks. Uncle Joe and aunt Dorothy told me this in their pleasant friendly way; while the young lady sat by, blushing and dimpling like a summer sea beneath the rosy flush of sunrise. No words can relate how delightful it was to me to hear them talk of my dear love's childhood; they dwelt so tenderly upon her sweetness, they dilated with such enthusiasm upon her "pretty ways." Her "pretty ways!" ah, how fatal a thing it is for mankind when Nature endows woman with those pretty ways! From the thrall of Grecian noses and Castilian eyes

there may be hope of deliverance, but from the spell of that indescribable witchery there is none.

I whistled my Sheldon down the wind without remorse, and allowed myself to be as happy as if I had been the squire of valley and hillside, with ten thousand a year to offer my Charlotte with the heart that loves her so fondly. I have no idea what we had for dinner. I know only that the fare was plenteous, and the hospitality of my new friends unbounded. We were very much at ease with one another, and our laughter rang up to the stalwart beams that sustained the old ceiling. If I had possessed the smallest fragment of my heart, I should have delivered it over without hesitation to my aunt Dorothy—pardon!—my Charlotte's aunt Dorothy, who is the cheeriest, brightest, kindest matron I ever met, with a sweet unworldly spirit that beams out of her candid blue eyes.

Charlotte seems to have been tenderly attached to her father, the poor fellow who died in Philip Sheldon's house—uncomfortable for Sheldon, I

should think. The Mercers talk a good deal of Thomas Halliday, for whom they appear to have entertained a very warm affection. They also spoke with considerable kindness of the two Sheldons, whom they knew as young men in the town of Barlingford; but I should not imagine either uncle Joseph or aunt Dorothy very well able to fathom the still waters of the Sheldon intellect.

After dinner uncle Joe took us round the farm. The last stack of corn had been thatched, and there was a peaceful lull in the agricultural world. We went into a quadrangle lined with poultry-sheds, where I saw more of the feathered race than I had ever in my life beheld congregated together; thence to the inspection of pigs—and it was agreeable to inspect even those vulgar querulous grunters with Charlotte by my side. Her brightness shed a light on all those common objects; and O, how I longed to be a farmer, like uncle Mercer, and devote my life to Charlotte and agriculture!

When uncle Joe had done the honours of his farm-yards and threshing-machinery, he left us to

attend to his afternoon duties; and we wandered together over the breezy upland at our own sweet wills, or at *her* sweet will rather, since what could I do but follow where she pleased to lead?

We talked of many things: of the father whom she had loved so dearly, whose memory was still so mournfully dear to her; of her old home at Hyley; of her visits to these dear Mercers; of her schooldays, and her new unloved home in the smart Bayswater villa. She confided in me as she had never done before; and when we turned in the chill autumn gloaming, I had told her of my love, and had won from her the sweet confession of its return.

I have never known happiness so perfect as that which I felt as we walked home together—home; yes, that old farm-house must be my home as well as hers henceforward; for any habitation which she loved must be a kind of home for me. Sober reflection tells me how reckless and imprudent my whole conduct has been in this business; but when did ever love and prudence go hand-in-hand? We were children, Charlotte and

I, on that blessed afternoon; and we told each other our love as children might have told it, without thought of the future. We have both grown wiser since that time, and are quite agreed as to our imprudence and foolishness; but, though we endeavour to contemplate the future in the most serious manner, we are too happy in the present to be able to analyse the difficulties and dangers that lie in our pathway.

Surely there must be a providence for imprudent lovers.

The November dews fell thick, and the November air was chill, as we walked back to the homestead. I was sorry that there should be that creeping dampness in the atmosphere that night. It seemed out of harmony with the new warmth in my heart. I pressed my darling's little hand closer to my breast, and had no more consciousness of any impediments to my future bliss than of the ground on which I walked—and that seemed air.

We found our chairs waiting for us at aunt Dorothy's tea-table; and I enjoyed that aldermanic

banquet, a Yorkshire tea, under circumstances that elevated it to an Olympian repast.

I thought of the Comic Latin Grammar :

> "Musa, musæ, the gods were at tea ;
> Musæ, musam, eating raspberry jam."

I was Jove and my love was Juno. I looked at her athwart the misty clouds that issued from the hissing urn, and saw her beautified by a heightened bloom, and with a sweet shy conscious look in her eyes which made her indeed divine.

After tea we played whist ; and I am bound to confess that my divinity played execrably, persistently disdaining to return her partner's lead, and putting mean little trumps upon her adversary's tricks, with a fatuous economy of resources which is always ruin.

I stayed till ten o'clock, reckless of the unknown country which separated me from the Magpie, and then walked home alone under the faint starlight, though my friendly host would fain have lent me a dogcart. The good people here lend one another dogcarts as freely as a cockney offers his umbrella. I went back to Huxter's

Cross alone, and the long solitary walk was very pleasant to me.

Looking up at the stars as I tramped homeward, I could but remember an old epigram:

"Were you the earth, dear love, and I the skies,
My love should shine on you like to the sun,
And look upon you with ten thousand eyes,
Till heaven wax'd blind, and till the world were done."

I had ample leisure for reflection during that long night-walk, and found myself becoming a perfect Young—Hervey—Sturm—what you will, in the way of meditation. I could not choose but wonder at myself when I looked back to this time last year, and remembered my idle evenings in third-rate *cafés*, on the *rive gauche*, playing dominoes, talking the foul slang of Parisian Bohemia, and poisoning my system with adulterated absinthe. And now I feast upon sweet cakes and honey, and think it paradisaic enjoyment to play whist—for love—in a farm-house parlour. I am younger by ten years than I was twelve months ago.

Ah, let me thank God, who has sent me my redemption.

I lifted my hat, and pronounced the thanksgiving softly under that tranquil sky. I was almost ashamed to hear the sound of my own voice. I was like some shy child who for the first time speaks his father's name.

CHAPTER V.

TOO FAIR TO LAST.

In my confidences with my dear girl I had told her neither the nature of my mission in Yorkshire, nor the fact that I was bound to leave Huxter's Cross immediately upon an exploring expedition to nowhere in particular, in search of the archives of the Meynells. How could I bring myself to tell her that I must leave her?—how much less could I bring myself to do it?

Rendered desperately unmindful of the universe by reason of my all-absorbing happiness, I determined on giving myself a holiday boldly, in defiance of Sheldon and the Sheldonian interests.

"Am I a bounden slave," I asked myself, "that I should go here or there at any man's bidding for the pitiful stipend of twenty shillings a week?"

It is to be observed that the rate of hire makes

all the difference in these cases; and while it is ignominious for a lawyer's clerk to hasten to and fro in the earning of his weekly wage, it is in no way dishonourable for the minister of state to obey the call of his chief, and hurry hither and thither in abnegation of all his own predilections, and to the aggravation of his chronic gout.

I wrote to my Sheldon, and told him that I had met with friends in the neighbourhood of Huxter's Cross, and that I intended to give myself a brief holiday; after which I would resume my labours, and do my uttermost to make up for wasted time. I had still the remnant of my borrowed thirty pounds, and amongst these northern hills I felt myself a millionnaire.

Three thousand pounds at five per cent—one hundred and fifty pounds a year. I felt that with such an income assured to us, and the fruits of my industry, Charlotte and I might be secure from all the storms of life. Ah, what happiness it would be to work for her! And I am not too old to begin life afresh; not too old for the bar; not too old to make some mark as a writer on the

press—not too old to become a respectable member of society.

After having despatched my letter to Sheldon, I made off for Newhall farm with all speed. I had received a sort of general invitation from the kindest of uncles and aunts, but I contrived with becoming modesty to arrive after Mr. Mercer's dinner-hour. I found Charlotte alone in the dear old-fashioned parlour, aunt Dorothy being engaged in some domestic operations in the kitchen, and uncle Joseph making his usual after-dinner rounds amongst the pig-sties and the threshing-machines. I discovered afterwards that it was Miss Halliday's wont to accompany her kind kinsman in this afternoon investigation; but to-day she had complained of a headache and preferred to stay at home. Yet there were few symptoms of the headache when I found her standing in the bow window, watching the path by which I came, and the face of Aurora herself could scarcely be brighter or fresher than my darling's innocent blushes when I greeted her with the privileged kiss of betrothal.

We sat in the bow window talking till the twilight shadows crept over the greensward, and the sheep were led away to their fold, with cheerful jingling of bells and barking of watchful dog. My dearest girl told me that our secret had already been discovered by the penetrating eyes of aunt Dorothy and uncle Joseph. They had teased her unmercifully, it seemed, all that day, but were graciously pleased to smile upon my suit, like a pair of imprudent Arcadians as they are.

"They like you very much indeed," my Lotta said joyously; "but I believe they think I have known you much longer than I really have, and that you are very intimate with my stepfather. It seems almost like deceiving them to allow them to think so, but I really haven't the courage to tell the truth. How foolish and bold they would think me if they knew how very short a time I have known you!"

"Twenty times longer than Juliet had known Romeo when they met in the Friar's cell to be married," I urged.

"Yes, but that was in a play," replied Char-

lotte, "where everything is obliged to be hurried; and at Hyde Lodge we all of us thought that Juliet was a very forward young person."

"The poets all believe in love at first sight, and I'll wager our dear uncle Joe fell over head and ears in love with aunt Dorothy after having danced with her two or three times at an assize ball," said I.

After this we became intensely serious, and I told my darling girl that I hoped very soon to be in possession of a small fixed income, and to have begun a professional career. I told her how dear an incentive to work she had given me, and how little fear I had for the future.

I reminded her that Mr. Sheldon had no legal power to control her actions, and that, as her father's will had left her entirely to her mother's guardianship, she had only her mother's pleasure to consult.

"I believe poor mamma would let me marry a crossing-sweeper, if I cried and declared it would make me miserable not to marry him," said Charlotte; "but then, you see, mamma's wishes mean

Mr. Sheldon's wishes; she is sure to think whatever he tells her to think; and if he is strongly against our marriage—"

"As I am sure he will be," I interjected.

"He will work upon poor mamma in that calm, persistent, logical way of his till he makes her as much against it as himself."

"But even your mamma has no legal power to control your actions, my love. Were you not of age on your last birthday?"

My darling replied in the affirmative.

"Then of course you are free to marry whom you please; and as I am thankful to say you don't possess a single sixpence in your own right, there need be no fuss about settlements or pin-money. We can marry any fine morning that my dear girl pleases to name, and defy all the stern stepfathers in creation."

"How I wish I had a fortune, for your sake!" she said with a sigh.

"Be glad for my sake that you have none," I answered. "You cannot imagine the miserable complications and perplexities which arise in this

world from the possession of money. No slave so tightly bound as the man who has what people call 'a stake in the country' and a balance at his banker's. The true monarch of all he surveys is the penniless reprobate who walks down Fleet-street with his whole estate covered by the seedy hat upon his head."

Having thus moralised, I proceeded to ask Miss Halliday if she was prepared to accept a humbler station than that enjoyed by her at the Lawn.

"No useful landau, to be an open carriage at noon and a family coach at night," I said; "no nimble page to skip hither and thither at his fair lady's commands, if not belated on the way by the excitement of tossing halfpence with youthful adventurers of the byways and alleys; no trim parlour-maids, with irreproachable caps, dressed for the day at 11 o'clock A.M.;—but instead of these, a humble six-roomed bandbox of a house, and one poor hardworking slavey, with perennial smudges from saucepan-lids upon her honest pug-nose. Consider the prospect seriously, Charlotte,

and ask yourself whether you can endure such a descent in the social scale."

My Charlotte laughed, as if the prospect had been the most delightful picture ever presented to mortal vision.

"Do you think I care for the landau or the page?" she cried. "If it were not for mamma's sake, I should detest that prim villa and all its arrangements. You see me so happy here, where there is no pretence of grandeur—"

"But I am bound to warn you that I shall not be able to provide Yorkshire teas at the commencement of our domestic career," I remarked, by way of parenthesis.

"Aunt Dorothy will send us hampers of poultry and cakes, sir, and for the rest of our time we can live upon bread and water."

On this I promised my betrothed a house in Cavendish or Portman-square, and a better-built landau than Mr. Sheldon's, in the remote future. With those dear eyes for my pole-stars, I felt myself strong enough to clamber up the slippery ascent to the woolsack. The best and purest

ambition must surely be that which is only a synonym for love.

After we had sat talking in the gloaming to our hearts' content, aunt Dorothy appeared, followed by a sturdy handmaid with lighted candles, and a still sturdier handmaid with a ponderous tea-tray. The two made haste to spread a snow-white cloth, and to set forth the species of banquet which it is the fashion nowadays to call high tea. Anon came uncle Joseph, bringing with him some slight perfume from the piggeries, and he and aunt Dorothy were pleased to be pleasantly facetious and congratulatory in their conversation during the social meal which followed their advent.

After tea we played whist again, aunt Dorothy and I obtaining a succession of easy victories over Charlotte and uncle Joe. I felt myself hourly more and more completely at home in that simple domestic circle, and enjoyed the proud position of an accepted lover. My Arcadian friends troubled themselves in no wise as to the approval or disap-

proval of Mr. and Mrs. Sheldon, or with regard either to my prospects or my antecedents. They saw me devoted to my dear girl, they saw my dearest pleased by my devotion, and they loved her so well that they were ready to open their hearts without reserve to the man who adored her and was loved by her, let him be rich or poor, noble or baseborn. As they would have given her the wax-doll of her desire ten or twelve years ago without question as to price or fitness of things, so they now gave her their kindly smiles and approval for the lover of her choice.

"I know Phil Sheldon is a man who looks to the main chance," said uncle Joe, in the course of a discussion about his niece's future which dyed her cheeks with blushes in the present; "and I'll lay you'll find him rather a difficult customer to deal with, especially as poor Tom's will left all the money in Georgy's hands, which of course is tantamount to saying that Sheldon has got the disposal of it."

I assured uncle Joe that money was the very last thing which I desired.

"Then in that case I don't see why he shouldn't let you have Charlotte," replied Mr. Mercer; "and if she's cheated out of her poor dad's money, she sha'n't be cheated out of what her old aunt and uncle may have to leave her by and by."

Here were these worthy people promising me an heiress with no more compunction than if they had been offering me a cup of tea.

I walked homeward once more beneath the quiet stars. O, how happy I was! Can happiness so perfect, joy so sinless, endure? I, the friendless wanderer and penniless Bohemian, asked myself this question; and again I paused upon the lonely moorland road to lift my hat as I thanked God for having given me such bright hopes.

But George Sheldon's three thousand pounds must be mine before I can secure the humblest shelter for my sweet one; and although it would be bliss to me to tramp through the world barefoot with Charlotte by my side, the barefooted state of things is scarcely the sort of prospect a man would

care to offer to the woman he loves. So once more to the chase. One more day in this delicious island of the lotus-eaters, Newhall farm; and then away! —hark forward!—tantivy!—and hey for the marriage lines of Charlotte Meynell, great-granddaughter of Matthew Haygarth, and, if still in the flesh, rightful heiress to the one hundred thousand pounds at present likely to be absorbed by the ravening jaws of the Crown! One more day, one more delightful idle day, in the land where it is always afternoon, and then away to Hidling in the hybrid vehicle, and thence to Hull, from Hull to York, from York to Leeds, then Bradford, Huddersfield—*toute la boutique!*

The rain beats against the diamond panes of my casement as I write. The day has been hopelessly wet, so I have stayed in my snug little chamber and occupied myself in writing this record. Foul wind or weather would have little power to keep me from my darling; but even if it had been a fine day, I could not with any grace have presented myself at Newhall farm for a third

afternoon. To-morrow my immediate departure will afford me an excuse for presenting myself once more before my kind uncle and aunt. It will be my farewell visit. I wonder whether Charlotte will miss me this afternoon. I wonder whether she will be sorry when I tell her that I am going to leave this part of the country. Ah, shall we ever meet again under such happy auspices? Shall I ever again find such kind friends or such a hospitable dwelling as those I shall leave amidst these northern hills?

CHAPTER VI.

FOUND IN THE BIBLE.

November 3d. The most wonderful event has befallen—surely the most wonderful that ever came to pass outside the realms of fiction. Let me set down the circumstances of yesterday coolly and quietly if I can. I invoke the placid spirit of my Sheldon. I invoke all the divinities of Gray's Inn and "The Fields." Let me be legal and specific, perspicacious and logical—if this beating heart, this fevered brain, will allow me a few hours' respite.

The autumn sunshine blessed the land again yesterday. Moorland and meadow, fallow and clover-field, were all the brighter for the steady downfall of the previous day. I walked to Newhall directly after breakfast, and found my dearest standing at the white five-barred gate, dressed in

her pretty blue jacket, and with ribbons in her bonny brown hair.

She was pleased to see me, though at first just a little inclined to play the *boudeuse* on account of my absence on the previous day. Of course I assured her that it had been anguish for me to remain away from her, and quoted that divine sonnet of our William's to the like effect:

> "How like a winter hath my absence been!"

and again:

> "O, never say that I was false of heart,
> Though absence seemed my flame to qualify."

Equally of course my pet pretended not to believe me. After this little misunderstanding we forgave each other, and adored each other again with just a little more than usual devotion; and then we went for a long ramble among the fields, and looked at the dear placid sheep, who stared at us wonderingly in return, as if exclaiming to themselves, "And these are a specimen couple of the creatures called lovers!"

We met uncle Joe in the course of our wanderings, and returned with him in time for the

vulgar superstition of dinner, which we might have forgotten had we been left by ourselves. After dinner uncle Joe made off to his piggeries; while aunt Dorothy fell asleep in a capacious old arm-chair by the fire, after making an apologetic remark to the effect that she was tired, and had been a good deal "tewed" that morning in the dairy. "Tewed," I understand, is Yorkshire for "worried."

Aunt Dorothy having departed into the shadowy realm of dreams, Charlotte and I were left to our own devices.

There was a backgammon board on a side-table, surmounted by an old Indian bowl of dried rose-leaves; and, *pour nous distraire*, I proposed that I should teach my dearest that diverting game. She assented, and we set to work in a very business-like manner, Miss Halliday all attention, I serious as a professional schoolmaster.

Unfortunately for my pupil's progress the game of backgammon proved less entertaining than our own conversation, so, after a very feeble attempt on the one side to learn and on the other

to teach, we closed the board and began to talk;—first of the past, then of the future, the happy future, which we were to share.

There is no need that I should set down this lovers' talk. Is it not written on my heart? The future seemed so fair and unclouded to me, as my love and I sat talking together yesterday afternoon. Now all is changed. The strangest, the most surprising complications have arisen; and I doubt, I fear.

After we had talked for a long time, Miss Halliday suddenly proposed that I should read to her.

"Diana once told me that you read very beautifully," said this flatterer; "and I should so like to hear you read—poetry, of course. You will find plenty of poems in that old bookcase—Cowper, and Bloomfield, and Pope. Now I am sure that Pope is just the kind of poet whose verses you would read magnificently. Shall we explore the bookcase together?"

Now if there is any manner of beguiling an idle afternoon which seems to me most delightful, it is by the exploration of old bookcases; and

when that delight can be shared by the woman one fondly loves, the pleasure thereof must be of course multiplied to an indefinite amount.

So Charlotte and I set to work immediately to ransack the lower shelves of the old-fashioned mahogany bookcase, which contained the entire library of the Mercer household.

I am bound to admit that we did not light upon many volumes of thrilling interest. The verses of Cowper have always appeared to me to have only one fault—there are too many of them. One shrinks appalled from that thick closely-printed volume of morality cut into lengths of ten feet; and beyond the few well-worn quotations in daily use, I am fain to confess that I am almost a stranger to the bard of Olney.

Half-a-dozen odd volumes of the *Gentleman's Magazine*, three or four of the *Annual Register*, a neatly-bound edition of *Clarissa Harlowe* and *Sir Charles Grandison* in twelve volumes, Law's *Holy Call to a Serious Life*, *Paradise Lost*, *Joseph Andrews*, *Hervey's Meditations*, and *Gulliver's Travels*, formed the varied contents of the prin-

cipal shelves. Above, there were shabbily-bound volumes and unbound pamphlets. Below, there were folios, the tops whereof were thickly covered with the dust of ages, having escaped the care of the handmaidens even in that neatly-appointed household.

I knelt down to examine these.

"You'll be covered with dust if you touch them," cried Charlotte. "I was once curious enough to examine them, but the result was very disappointing."

"And yet they look so delightfully mysterious," I said. "This one, for instance?"

"That is an old history of London, with curious plates and maps; rather interesting if one has nothing more amusing to read. But the perennial supply of novels from Mudie's spoils one for that kind of book."

"If ever I come to Newhall again, I shall dip into the old history. One is never tired of dead and gone London. But after Mr. Knight's delightful book any old history must seem very poor. What is my burly friend here?"

"O, a dreadful veterinary-surgeon's encyclopædia—*The Farmer's Friend* I think it is called; all about the ailments of animals."

"And the next?"

"The next is an odd volume of the *Penny Magazine*. Dear aunt Dorothy is rich in odd volumes."

"And the next,—my bulky friend number two,—with a cracked leather back and a general tendency to decay?"

"O, that is the Meynell Bible."

The MEYNELL BIBLE! A hot perspiration broke out upon my face as I knelt at Charlotte Halliday's feet, with my hand resting lightly on the top of the book.

"The Meynell Bible!" I repeated; and my voice was faintly tremulous, in spite of the effort I made to control myself. "What do you mean by the Meynell Bible?"

"I mean the old family Bible that belonged to my grandmamma. It was her father's Bible, you know; and of course he was my great-grand-

father—Christian Meynell. Why, how you stare at me, Valentine! Is there anything so wonderful in my having had a great-grandfather?"

"No, darling; but the fact is that I—"

In another moment I should have told her the entire truth; but I remembered just in time that I had pledged myself to profound secrecy with regard to the nature and progress of my investigation, and I had yet to learn whether that pledge did or did not involve the observance of secrecy even with those most interested in my researches. Pending further communication with Sheldon, I was certainly bound to be silent.

"I have a kind of interest in the name of Meynell," I said, "for I was once engaged in a business matter with people of that name."

And having thus hoodwinked my beloved with a bouncer, I proceeded to extract the Bible from its shelf. The book was so tightly wedged into its place, that to remove it was like drawing a tooth. It was a noble-looking old volume, blue with the mould of ages, and redolent of a chill dampness like the atmosphere of a tomb.

"I should so like to examine the old book when the candles come in," I said.

Fortunately for the maintenance of my secret, the darkness was closing in upon us when I discovered the volume, and the room was only fitfully illuminated by the flame that brightened and faded every minute.

I carried the book to a side-table, and Charlotte and I resumed our talk until the candles came, and close behind them uncle Joe. I fear I must have seemed a very inattentive lover during that brief interval, for I could not concentrate my thoughts upon the subject of our discourse. My mind would wander to the strange discovery that I had just made, and I could not refrain from asking myself whether by any extraordinary chance my own dear love should be the rightful claimant to John Haygarth's hoarded wealth.

I hoped that it might not be so. I hoped that my darling might be penniless rather than the heir to wealth, which, in all likelihood, would create an obstacle strong enough to sever us eternally. I longed to question her about her family,

but could not as yet trust myself to breach the subject. And while I doubted and hesitated, honest blustering uncle Joe burst into the room, and aunt Dorothy awoke, and was unutterably surprised to find she had slept so long.

After this came tea; and as I sat opposite my dearest girl I could not choose but remember that gray-eyed Molly, whose miniature had been found in the tulip-wood bureau, and in whose bright face I had seen the likeness of Philip Sheldon's beautiful stepdaughter. And Mr. Sheldon's lovely stepdaughter was the lineal descendant of this very Molly. Strange mystery of transmitted resemblances! Here was the sweet face that had bewitched honest, simple-minded Matthew Haygarth reproduced after the lapse of a century.

My Charlotte was descended from a poor little player girl who had smiled on the roisterous populace at Bartholomew Fair. Some few drops of Bohemian blood mingled with the pure life-stream in her veins. It pleased me to think of this; but I derived no pleasure from the idea that Charlotte might possibly be the claimant of a great fortune.

"She may have cousins who would stand before her," I said to myself; and there was some comfort in the thought.

After tea I asked permission to inspect the old family Bible, much to the astonishment of uncle Joe, who had no sympathy with antiquarian tastes, and marvelled that I should take any interest in so mouldy a volume. I told him, with perfect truth, that such things had always more or less interest for me: and then I withdrew to my little table, where I was provided with a special pair of candles.

"You'll find the births and deaths of all poor Molly's ancestors on the first leaf," said uncle Joe. "Old Christian Meynell was a rare one for jotting down such things: but the ink has gone so pale that it's about as much as you'll do to make sense of it, I'll lay."

Charlotte looked over my shoulder as I examined the fly-leaf of the family Bible. Even with this incentive to distraction I contrived to be tolerably business-like; and this is the record which I found on the faded page:

"Samuel Matthew Meynell, son of Christian and Sarah Meynell, b. March 9, 1796, baptised at St. Giles's, Cripplegate, in this city.

"Susan Meynell, daughter of Christian and Sarah Meynell, b. June 29, 1798, also baptised in the same church.

"Charlotte Meynell, second daughter of the above Christian and Sarah, b. October 3, 1800, baptised at the above-mentioned church of St. Giles, London."

Below these entries, in blacker ink and in a different handwriting—a bold, business-like, masculine caligraphy—came the following:

"Charlotte Meynell married to James Halliday, in the parish church of Barngrave, Yorks. April 15, 1819.

"Thomas Halliday, son of the above James and Charlotte Halliday, b. Jan. 3d, 1821, baptised in the parish church of Barngrave, Feb. 20 in the same year.

"Mary Halliday, daughter of the above-named James and Charlotte Halliday, b. May 27th, 1823, baptised at Barngrave, July 1st in the same year."

Below this there was an entry in a woman's penmanship:

"Susan, the beloved sister of C. H., died in London, July 11, 1835.

"Judge not, that ye be not judged.

"I came to call sinners, and not the righteous, to repentance."

This record seemed to hint vaguely at some sad story: "Susan, the beloved sister;" no precise data of the death—no surname! And then those two deprecating sentences, which seemed to plead for the dead.

I had been led to understand that Christian Meynell's daughters had both died in Yorkshire—one married, the other unmarried.

The last record in the book was the decease of James Halliday, my dear girl's grandfather.

After pondering long over the strangely-worded entry of Susan Meynell's death, I reflected that, with the aid of those mysterious powers Hook and Crook, I must contrive to possess myself of an exact copy of this leaf from a family history, if not of the original document. Again my duty to

my Sheldon impelled me to be false to all my newborn instincts and boldly give utterance to another bouncer.

"I am very much interested in a county history now preparing for the press," I said to my honoured uncle, who was engaged in a hand at cribbage with his wife; "and I really think this old leaf from a family Bible would make a very interesting page in that work."

I blushed for myself as I felt how shamefully I was imposing upon my newly-found kinsman's credulity. With scarcely anyone but uncle Joe could I have dared to employ so shallow an artifice.

"Would it really, now?" said that confiding innocent. "Well, I suppose old papers, and letters, and such like, are uncommonly interesting to some folks. I can't say I care much about 'em myself."

"Would you have any objection to my taking a copy of these entries?" I asked.

"My word, no, lad; not I. Take half a dozen copies, and welcome, if they can be of any use to you or other people. That's not much to ask for."

I thanked my simple host, and determined to write to a stationer at Hull for some tracing-paper by the first post next morning. There was some happiness at least in having found this unlooked-for end to my researches. I had a good excuse for remaining longer near Charlotte Halliday.

"It's only for my poor Mary's sake I set any value on that old volume," the farmer said presently, in a meditative tone. "You see the names there are the names of her relations, not mine: and this place and all in it was hers. Dorothy and I are only interlopers, as you may say, at the best, though I brought my fortune to the old farm, and Dorothy brought her fortune, and between us we've made Newhall a much better place than it was in old James Halliday's time. But there's something sad in the thought that none of those that were born on the land have left chick or child to inherit it."

Uncle Joseph fell for a while into a pensive reverie, and I thought of that other inheritance, well-nigh fifty times the value of Newhall farm, which is now waiting for a claimant. And again

I asked myself, Could it be possible that this sweet girl, whose changeful face had saddened with those old memories, whose innocent heart knew not one sordid desire—could it be indeed she whose fair hand was to wrest the Haygarthian gold from the grip of Crown lawyers?

The sight of the old Bible seemed to have revived Mr. Mercer's memory of his first wife with unwonted freshness.

"She was a sweet young creature," he said; "the living picture of our Lottie, and sometimes I fancy it must have been that which made me take to Lottie when she was a little one. I used to see my first wife's eyes looking up at me out of Lottie's eyes. I told Tom it was a comfort to me to have the little lass with me, and that's how they let her come over so often from Hyley. Poor old Tom used to bring her over in his Whitechapel cart, and leave her behind him for a week or so at a stretch. And then, when my Dorothy yonder took pity upon a poor lonely widower, she made as much of the little girl as if she'd been her own, and more perhaps; for not having any

children of her own, she thought them such out-of-the-way creatures, that you couldn't coddle them and pet them too much. There's a little baby lies buried in Barngrave churchyard with Tom Halliday's sister that would have been a noble young man, sitting where you're sitting, Mr. Hawkehurst, and looking at me as bright as you're looking, perhaps, if the Lord's will hadn't been otherwise. We've all our troubles, you see, and that was mine; and if it hadn't been for Dorothy, life would not have been worth much for me after that time—but my Dorothy is all manner of blessings rolled up in one."

The farmer looked fondly at his second wife as he said this, and she blushed and smiled upon him with responsive tenderness. I fancy a woman's blushes and smiles wear longer in these calm solitudes than amid the tumult and clamour of a great city.

Finding my host inclined to dwell upon the past, I ventured to hazard an indirect endeavour to obtain some information respecting that entry in the Bible which had excited my curiosity.

"Miss Susan Meynell died unmarried, I believe?" I said. "I see her death recorded here, but she is described by her christian name only."

"Ah, very like," replied Mr. Mercer, with an air of indifference, which I perceived to be assumed. "Yes, my poor Molly's aunt Susan died unmarried."

"And in London? I had been given to understand that she died in Yorkshire."

I blushed for my own impertinence as I pressed this inquiry. What right had I to be given to understand anything about these honest Meynells? I saw poor uncle Joe's disconcerted face, and I felt that the hunter of an heir-at-law is apt to become a very obnoxious creature.

"Susan Meynell died in London—the poor lass died in London," replied Joseph Mercer gravely; "and now we'll drop that subject, if you please, my lad. It isn't a pleasant one."

After this I could no longer doubt that there was some painful story involved in those two deprecating sentences of the gospel.

It was some time before uncle Joe was quite

his own jovial and rather noisy self again, and on this evening we had no whist. I bade my friends good-night a little earlier than usual, and departed, after having obtained permission to take a tracing of the fly-leaf as soon as possible.

On this night the starlit sky and lonesome moor seemed to have lost their soothing power. There was a new fever in my mind. The simple plan of the future which I had mapped out for myself was suddenly shattered. The Charlotte of to-night—heiress-at-law to an enormous fortune—ward in Chancery—claimant against the Crown—was a very different person from the simple maid "whom there were none"—or only a doating simpleton in the person of the present writer—"to praise, and very few to love."

The night before last I had hoped so much; to-night hope had forsaken me. It seemed as if a Titan's hand had dug a great pit between me and the woman I loved—a pit as deep as the grave.

Philip Sheldon might have consented to give me his stepdaughter unpossessed of a sixpence: but would he give me his stepdaughter with a

hundred thousand pounds for her fortune? Alas, no; I know the Sheldonian intellect too well to be fooled by any hope so wild and baseless. The one bright dream of my misused life faded from me in the hour in which I discovered my dearest girl's claim to the Haygarthian inheritance. But I am not going to throw up the sponge before the fight is over. Time enough to die when I am lying face downward in the ensanguined mire, and feel the hosts of the foeman trampling above my shattered carcass. I will live in the light of my Charlotte's smiles while I can—and for the rest—"*Il ne faut pas dire, fontaine, je ne boirai pas de ton eau.*" There is no cup so bitter that a man dare say, I will not drain it to the very dregs. "What must be, shall be—that's a certain text;" and in the mean time *carpe diem*. I am all a Bohemian again.

Nov. 5th. After a day's delay I have obtained my tracing-paper, and made two tracings of the entries in the Meynell Bible. How intercourse with the Sheldonian race inclines one to the duplication of documents! I consider the copy-

ing-press of modern civilisation the supreme incarnation of man's distrust of his fellow-men.

I spent this afternoon and evening with my dear love—my last evening in Yorkshire. To-morrow I shall see my Sheldon, and inform him of the very strange termination which has come to my researches. Will he communicate at once with his brother? Will he release me from my oath of secrecy? There is nothing of the masonic secretiveness in my organisation, and I am very weary of the seal that has been set upon my unwary lips. Will Charlotte be told that she is the reverend intestate's next of kin? These are questions which I ask myself as I sit in the stillness of my room at the Magpie, scribbling this wretched diary of mine, while the church-clock booms three solemn strokes in the distance.

O, why did not the reverend intestate marry his housekeeper, and make a will, like other honest citizens, and leave my Charlotte to walk the obscure byways of honest poverty with me? I do believe that I could have been honest; I do believe that I could have been brave and true and stead-

fast for her dear sake. But it is the office of man to propose, while the Unseen disposes. Perhaps such a youth as mine admits of no redemption. I have written circulars for Horatio Paget. I have been the willing remorseless tool of a man who never eats his dinner without inflicting a wrong upon his fellow-creatures. Can a few moments of maudlin sentimentality, a vague yearning for something brighter and better, a brief impulse towards honesty inspired by a woman's innocent eyes—can so little virtue in the present atone for so much guilt in the past? Alas! I fear not.

I had one last brief *tête-à-tête* with my dear girl while I took the tracing from the old Bible. She sat watching me, and distracting me more or less while I worked; and despite the shadow of doubt that has fallen upon me, I could not be otherwise than happy in her sweet company.

When I came to the record of Susan Meynell's death, my Charlotte's manner changed all at once from her accustomed joyousness to a pensive gravity.

"I was very sorry you spoke of Susan Meynell to uncle Joseph," she said thoughtfully.

"But why sorry, my dear?"

I had some vague notion as to the cause of this sorrow: but the instincts of the chase impelled me to press the subject. Was I not bound to know every secret in the lives of Matthew Haygarth's descendants?

"There is a very sad story connected with my aunt Susan—she was my great-aunt, you know," said Charlotte, with a grave earnest face. "She went away from home, and there was great sorrow. I cannot talk of the story even to you, Valentine, for there seems something sacred in these painful family secrets. My poor aunt Susan left all her friends, and died many years afterwards in London."

"She was known to have died unmarried?" I asked. This would be an important question from George Sheldon's point of sight.

"Yes," Charlotte replied, blushing crimson.

That blush told me a great deal.

"There was someone concerned in this poor

lady's sorrow," I said; "someone to blame for all her unhappiness."

"There was."

"One whom she loved and trusted, perhaps?"

"Whom she loved and trusted only too well. O, Valentine, must not that be terrible? To confide with all your heart in the person you love, and to find him base and cruel! If my poor aunt had not believed Montagu Kingdon to be true and honourable, she would have trusted her friends a little, instead of trusting so entirely in him. O, Valentine, what am I telling you? I cannot bear to cast a shadow on the dead."

"My dear love, do you think I cannot pity this injured lady? Do you think I am likely to play the Pharisee, and be eager to bespatter the grave of this poor sufferer? I can almost guess the story which you shrink from telling me—it is one of those sad histories so often acted, so often told. Your aunt loved a person called Montagu Kingdon—her superior in station, perhaps?"

I looked at Charlotte as I said this, and her face told me that I had guessed rightly.

"This Montagu Kingdon admired and loved her," I said. "He seemed eager to make her his wife, but no doubt imposed secrecy as to his intentions. She accepted his word as that of a true-hearted lover and a gentleman, and in the end had bitter reason to repent her confidence. That is an outline of the story, is it not, Charlotte?"

"I am sure that it was so. I am sure that when she left Newhall she went away to be married," cried Charlotte eagerly; "I have seen a letter that proves it—to me, at least. And yet I have heard even mamma speak harshly of her—so long dead and gone off the face of this earth—as if she had deliberately chosen the sad fate which came to her."

"Is it not possible that Mr. Kingdon did marry Miss Meynell, after all?"

"No," replied Charlotte very sadly; "there is no hope of that. I have seen a letter written by my poor aunt years afterwards, a letter that tells much of the cruel truth; and I have heard that Mr. Kingdon came back to Yorkshire and married a rich lady during my aunt's lifetime."

"I should like to see that letter," I said involuntarily.

"Why, Valentine?" asked my darling, looking at me with sorrowful, wondering eyes. "To me it seems so painful to talk of these things: it is like reopening an old wound."

"But if the interests of other people require—" I began, in a very blundering manner.

"Whose interest can be served by my showing you my poor aunt's letter? It would seem like an act of dishonour to the dead."

What could I say after this—bound hand and foot as I am by my promise to Sheldon?

After a long talk with my sweet one, I borrowed uncle Joe's dogcart, and spun across to Barngrave, where I found the little church beneath whose gray old roof Charlotte Meynell plighted her troth to James Halliday. I took a copy of all entries in the register concerning Mrs. Meynell Halliday and her children, and then went back to Newhall to restore the dogcart, and to take my last Yorkshire tea at the hospitable old farm-house.

To-morrow I am off to Barlingford, fifteen miles from this village, to take more copies of registries concerning my sweet young heiress—the registries of her father's marriage and her own birth. After that I think my case will be tolerably complete, and I can present myself to Sheldon in the guise of a conqueror.

Is it not a great conquest to have made? Is it not almost an act of chivalry for these prosaic days to go forth into the world as a private inquirer and win a hundred thousand pounds for the lady of one's love? And yet I wish anyone rather than my Charlotte were the lineal descendant of Matthew Haygarth.

Nov. 10th. Here I am in London once more, with my Sheldon in ecstatics, and our affairs progressing marvellously well, as he informs me; but with that ponderous slowness peculiar to all mortal affairs in which the authorities of the realm are in any way concerned.

My work is finished. Hawkehurst the genealogist and antiquarian sinks into Hawkehurst the private individual. I have no more to do but to

mind my own business, and await the fruition of time in the shape of my reward.

Can I accept three thousand pounds for giving my dearest her birthright? Can I take payment for a service done to her? Surely not: and on the other hand can I continue to woo my sweet one, conscious that she is the rightful claimant to a great estate? Can I take advantage of her ignorance, and may it not be said that I traded on my secret knowledge?

Before leaving Yorkshire I stole one more day from the Sheldon business, in order to loiter just a few hours longer in that northern Arcadia called Newhall farm. What assurance have I that I shall ever reënter that pleasant dwelling? What hold have I, a wanderer and vagabond, on the future which respectable people map-out for themselves with such mathematical precision? And even the respectable people are sometimes out in their reckoning. To snatch the joys of to-day must always be the policy of the adventurer. So I took one more happy afternoon at Newhall. Nor was the afternoon entirely wasted, for in the

course of my farewell visit I heard more of poor Susan Meynell's history from honest uncle Joseph. He told me the story during an after-dinner walk, in which he took me the round of his pigsties and cattle-sheds for the last time, as if he would fain have had them leave their impress on my heart.

"You may see plenty of cattle in Yorkshire," he remarked complacently, "but you won't see many beasts to beat that."

He pointed to a brown and mountainous mass of inert matter, which he gave me to understand was something in the way of cattle.

"Would you like to see him standing?" he asked, giving the mass a prod with the handle of his walking-stick, which to my cockney mind seemed rather cruel, but which, taken from an agricultural point of view, was no doubt the correct thing. "He *can* stand. Coom up, Brownie!"

I humbly entreated that the ill-used mass might be allowed to sprawl in undisturbed misery.

"Thorley!" exclaimed Mr. Mercer, laying his finger significantly against the side of his unpretending nose.

I had not the faintest comprehension of my revered uncle-in-law's meaning; but I said, "O, indeed!" with the accents of admiration.

"Thorley's Condiment," said my uncle. "You'll see some fine animals at the Cattle-show; but if you see a two-year-old ox to beat him, my name is not Joe Mercer."

After this I had to pay my respects to numerous specimens of the bovine race, all more or less prostrate under the burden of superabundant flesh, all seeming to cry aloud for the treatment of some Banting of the agricultural world.

After we had "done" the cattle-sheds, with heroic resignation on my part, and with enthusiasm on the part of Mr. Mercer, we went a long way to see some rarities in the way of mutton, which commodity was to be found cropping the short grass on a distant upland.

With very little appreciation of the zoological varieties, and with the consciousness that my dear one was sitting in the farm-house parlour wondering at my prolonged absence, this excursion could not be otherwise than a bore to me. But it was a

small thing to sacrifice my own pleasure for once in a way, when by so doing I might gratify the kindest of men and of uncles; so I plodded briskly across the fields with the friendly farmer.

I had my reward: for in the course of this walk Mr. Mercer gave me the history of poor Susan Meynell.

"I didn't care to talk about the story the other night before the young lass," he said gravely; "for her heart's so full of pity and tenderness, pretty dear, that any tale such as that is like to upset her. But the story's known to almost all the folks in these parts; so there's no particular reason against my telling it to you. I've heard my poor mother talk of Susan Meynell many a time. She was a regular beauty, it seems; prettier than her sister Charlotte, and she was a pretty woman, as you may guess by looking at *our* Charlotte, who is thought the image of her grandmother. But Susan was one of those beauties that you don't see very often—more like a picture than flesh and blood. The gentry used to turn round to look at her at Barngrave church, I've

heard my mother say. She was a rare one for dress, too; for she had a few hundreds left her by her father and mother, who had both of them been very well-to-do people. The mother was daughter to William Rand, of Barngrave, a man who farmed above a thousand acres of his own land; and the father kept a carpet warehouse in Aldersgate-street."

This information I received with respectful deference, and a hypocritical assumption of ignorance respecting Miss Meynell's antecedents.

Mr. Mercer paused to take breath, and then continued the story after his own rambling fashion.

"Well, my lad, what with her fine dress, and what with her pretty looks, Susan Meynell seems to have thought a little too much of herself; so that when Montagu Kingdon, of Kingdon-place, younger brother to Lord Durnsville, fell in love with her, and courted her,—not exactly openly, but with the knowledge of her sister, Mrs. Halliday,—she thought it no more than natural that he should intend to make her his wife. Mr. Kingdon was ten years older than Susan, and had served in Spain, and had not borne too good a character

abroad. He had been in a hard-drinking cavalry regiment, and had spent all his money, and sold out directly the war was over. There was very little of all this known down hereabouts, where Mr. Kingdon stood very high, on account of his being Lord Durnsville's brother. But it was known that he was poor, and that the Durnsville estates were heavily encumbered into the bargain."

"Then this gentleman would have been no grand match for Miss Meynell, if—"

"If he had married her? No, my lad; and it might have been the knowledge of his poverty that made Susan and her sister think less of the difference between his station and the girl's. The two women favoured him, anyhow; and they kept the secret from James Halliday, who was a regular upstraight-and-downright kind of fellow, as proud as any lord in his own way. The secret was kept safe enough for some time, and Mr. Kingdon was always dropping in at Newhall when Jim was out of the way; but folks in these parts are very inquisitive, and, lonesome as our place is, there are plenty of people go by between Monday and Satur-

day; so by and bye it got to be noticed that there was very often a gentleman's horse standing at Newhall gate, with the bridle tied to one of the gate-posts; and those that knew anything knew that the horse belonged to Montagu Kingdon. A friend of Jim Halliday's told him as much one day, and warned him that Mr. Kingdon was a scamp, and was said to have a Spanish wife somewhere beyond seas. This was quite enough for James Halliday, who flew into a roaring rage at the notion of any man, most of all Lord Durnsville's brother, going to his house and courting his sister-in-law in secret. It was at Barngrave he was told this, one market-day, as he was lounging with his friends in the old yard of the Black Bull inn, where the corn exchange used to be held in those days. He called for his horse the next minute, and left the town at a gallop. When he came to Newhall, he found Montagu Kingdon's chestnut mare tied to the gate-post, and he found Mr. Kingdon himself dawdling about the garden with Miss Meynell."

"And then I suppose there was a scene?" I

suggested, with unfeigned interest in this domestic story.

"Well, I believe there was, my lad. I've heard all about it from my poor Molly, who had the story from her mother. James Halliday didn't mince matters; he gave Mr. Kingdon a bit of his mind, in his own rough outspoken way, and told him it would be the worse for him if he ever crossed the threshold of Newhall gate again. 'If you meant well by that foolish girl, you wouldn't come sneaking here behind my back,' he said; 'but you don't mean well by her, and you've a Spanish wife hidden away somewhere in the Peninsula.' Mr. Kingdon gave the lie to this; but he said he shouldn't stoop to justify himself to an unmannerly yeoman. 'If you were a gentleman,' he said, 'you should pay dearly for your insolence.' 'I'm ready to pay any price you like,' answered James Halliday, as bold as brass; 'but as you weren't over fond of fighting abroad, where there was plenty to be got for it, I don't suppose you want to fight at home, where there's nothing to be got for it.'"

"And did Susan Meynell hear this?" I asked. I could fancy this ill-fated girl standing by and looking on aghast while hard things were said to the man she loved, while the silver veil of sweet romance was plucked so roughly from the countenance of her idol by an angry rustic's rude hand.

"Well, I don't quite know whether she heard all," answered Mr. Mercer thoughtfully. "Of course, James Halliday told his wife all about the row afterwards. He was very kind to his sister-in-law, in spite of her having deceived him; and he talked to her very seriously, telling her all he had heard in Barngrave against Montagu Kingdon. She listened to him quietly enough; but it was quite clear that she didn't believe a word he said. 'I know you have heard all that, James,' she said; 'but the people who said it knew they were not telling the truth. Lord Durnsville and his brother are not popular in the country, and there are no falsehoods too cruel for the malice of his enemies.' She answered him with some such fine speech as that, and when the next morning came she was gone."

"She eloped with Mr. Kingdon."

"Yes. She left a letter for her sister, full of romantic stuff about loving him all the better because people spoke ill of him; regular woman's talk, you know, bless their poor silly hearts!" murmured Mr. Mercer, with tender compassion. "She was going to London to be married to Mr. Kingdon, she wrote. They were to be married at the old church in the city where she had been christened, and she was going to stay with an old friend—a young woman who had once been her brother's sweetheart, and who was married to a butcher in Newgate-market — till the bans were given out, or the license bought. The butcher's wife had a country-house out at Edmonton, and it was there Susan was going to stay."

"All that seemed straightforward enough," said I.

"Yes," replied uncle Joe; "but if Mr. Kingdon had meant fairly by Susan Meynell, it would have been as easy for him to marry her at Barngrave as in London. He was as poor as a church mouse; but he was his own master, and there was

no one to prevent him doing just what he pleased. This is about what James Halliday thought, I suppose; for he tore off to London, as fast as post-horses could carry him, in pursuit of his wife's sister and Mr. Kingdon. But though he made inquiries all along the road he could not hear that they had passed before him, and for the best of all reasons. He went to the butcher's house at Edmonton; but there he found no trace of Susan Meynell, except a letter posted in Yorkshire, on the day of the row between James and Mr. Kingdon, telling her intention of visiting her old friend within the next few days, and hinting at an approaching marriage. There was the letter announcing the visit, but the visitor had not come."

"But the existence of that letter bears witness that Miss Meynell believed in the honesty of her lover's intentions."

"To be sure it does, poor lass," answered Mr. Mercer pensively. "She believed in the word of a scoundrel, and she was made to pay dearly for her simplicity. James Halliday did all he could to find her. He searched London through, as far

as any man can search such a place as London; but it was no use, and for a very good reason, as I said before. The end of it was, he was obliged to go back to Newhall no wiser than when he started."

"And was nothing further ever discovered?" I asked eagerly, for I felt that this was just one of those family complications from which all manner of legal difficulties might arise.

"Don't be in a hurry, my lad," answered uncle Joe; "wickedness is sure to come to light sooner or later. Three years after this poor young woman ran away there was a drunken groom dismissed from Lord Durnsville's stable; and what must he needs do but come straight off to James Halliday, to vent his spite against his master, and perhaps to curry favour at Newhall. 'You shouldn't have gone to London to look for the young lady, Muster Halliday,' he said; 'you should have gone the other way. I know a man as drove Mr. Kingdon and your wife's sister across country to Hull with two of my lord's own horses, stopping to bait on the way. They went aboard ship at Hull, Mr. Kingdon and the young lady—a

ship that was bound for foreign parts.' This is what the groom said; but it was little good knowing it now. There'd been advertisements in the papers beseeching her to come back; and everything had been done that could be done, and all to no end. A few years after this back comes Mr. Kingdon as large as life, married to some dark-faced, frizzy-haired lady, whose father owned half the Indies, according to people's talk: but he fought very shy of James Halliday; but when they did meet one day at the covert side, Jim rode up to the honourable gentleman and asked him what he had done with Susan Meynell. Those that saw the meeting said that Montagu Kingdon turned as white as a ghost when he saw Jim Halliday riding up to him on his big, raw-boned horse; but nothing came of the quarrel. Mr. Kingdon did not live many years to enjoy the money his frizzy-haired West-Indian lady brought him. He died before his brother, Lord Durnsville, and left neither chick nor child to inherit his money, nor yet the Durnsville title, which was extinct on the death of the viscount."

"And what of the poor girl?"

"Ay, poor lass, what of her? It was fourteen years after she left her home before her sister got so much as a line to say she was in the land of the living. When a letter did come at last it was a very melancholy one. The poor creature wrote to her sister to say she was in London, alone and penniless, and, as she thought, dying."

"And the sister went to her?"

I remembered that deprecating sentence in the family Bible, written in a woman's hand.

"That she did, good honest soul, as fast as she could travel, carrying a full purse along with her. She found poor Susan at an inn near Aldersgate-street—the old quarter, you see, that she'd known in her young days. Mrs. Halliday meant to have brought the poor soul back to Yorkshire, and had settled it all with Jim; but it was too late for anything of that kind. She found Susan dying, wandering in her mind off and on, but just able to recognise her sister, and to ask forgiveness for having trusted to Montagu Kingdon, instead of

taking counsel from those that wished her well."

"Was that all?" I asked presently.

Mr. Mercer made long pauses in the course of his narrative, during which we walked briskly on; he pondering on those past events, I languishing for further information.

"Well, lad, that was about all. Where Susan had been in all those years, or what she had been doing, was more than Mrs. Halliday could find out. Of late she had been living somewhere abroad. The clothes she had last worn were of foreign make, very poor and threadbare; and there was one little box in her room at the inn that had been made at Rouen, for the name of a Rouen trunk-maker was on the inside of the lid. There were no letters or papers of any kind in the box; so you see there was no way of finding out what the poor creature's life had been. All her sister could do was to stay with her and comfort her to the last, and to see that she was quietly laid to rest in a decent grave. She was buried in a quiet little city churchyard, somewhere where there are green

trees among the smoke of the chimney-pots. Montagu Kingdon had been dead some years when that happened."

"Is that last letter still in existence?" I asked.

"Yes; my first wife kept it with the rest of her family letters and papers. Dorothy takes care of them now. We country folks set store by those sort of things, you know."

I would fain have asked Mr. Mercer to let me see this last letter written by Susan Meynell; but what excuse could I devise for so doing? I was completely fettered by my promise to George Sheldon, and could offer no reasonable pretence for my curiosity.

There was one point which I was bound to push home in the interests of my Sheldon, or, shall I not rather say, of my Charlotte? That all-important point was the question of marriage or no marriage.

"You feel quite clear as to the fact that Montagu Kingdon never did marry this young woman?" I said.

"Well, yes," replied uncle Joe; "that was

proved beyond doubt, I'm sorry to say. Mr. Kingdon never could have dared to come back here with his West-Indian wife in poor Susan Meynell's lifetime if he had really married her."

"And how about the lady he was said to have married in Spain?"

"I can't say anything about that. It may have been only a scandal, or, if there was a marriage, it may have been illegal. The Kingdons were Protestants, and the Spaniards are all papists, I suppose. A marriage between a Protestant and a Roman Catholic wouldn't be binding."

"Not upon such a man as this Kingdon."

It seems more than probable that the opinion arrived at by this poor soul's friends must be correct, and that Montagu Kingdon was a scoundrel. But how about Susan Meynell's after-life?—the fourteen years in which she was lost sight of. May she not have married someone else than Mr. Kingdon? and may she not have left heirs who will arise in the future to dispute my darling's claim?

Is it a good thing to have a great inheritance?

The day has been when such a question as that could not by any possibility have shaped itself in my mind. Ah! what is this subtle power called love, which worketh such wondrous changes in the human heart? Surely the miracle of the cleansed leper is in some manner typical of this transformation. The emanation of divine purity encircled the leper with its supernal warmth, and the scales fell away beneath that mysterious influence. And so from the pure heart of a woman issues a celestial fire which burns the plague-spot out of the sinner's breast. Ah, how I languish to be at my darling's feet, thanking her for the cure she has wrought!

I have given my Sheldon the story of Susan Meynell's life, as I had it from uncle Joseph. He agrees with me as to the importance of Susan's last letter, but even that astute creature does not see a way to getting the document in his hands without letting Mr. Mercer more or less into our secret.

"I might tell this man Mercer some story about a little bit of money coming to his niece,

and get at Susan Meynell's letter that way," he said; "but whatever I told him would be sure to get round to Philip somehow or other, and I don't want to put him on the scent."

My Sheldon's legal mind more than ever inclines to caution now that he knows the heiress of the Haygarths is so nearly allied to his brother Philip.

"I'll tell you what it is, Hawkehurst," he said to me, after we had discussed the business in all its bearings, "there are not many people I'm afraid of, but I don't mind owning to you that I am afraid of my brother Phil. He has always walked over my head; partly because he can wear his shirt-front all through business hours without creasing it, which I can't, and partly because he's —well—more unscrupulous than I am."

He paused meditatively, and I too was meditative; for I could not choose but wonder what it was to be more unscrupulous than George Sheldon.

"If he were to get an inkling of this affair," my patron resumed presently, "he'd take it out

of our hands before you could say Jack Robinson —supposing anybody ever wanted to say Jack Robinson, which they don't—and he'd drive a bargain with us, instead of our driving a bargain with him."

My friend of Gray's Inn has a pleasant way of implying that our interests are coequal in this affair. I caught him watching me curiously once or twice during our last interview, when Charlotte's name was mentioned. Does he suspect the truth, I wonder?

Nov. 12*th.* I had another interview with my patron yesterday, and rather a curious interview, though not altogether unsatisfactory. George Sheldon has been making good use of his time since my return from Yorkshire.

"I don't think we need have any fear of opposition from children or grandchildren of Susan Meynell," he said; "I have found the registry of her interment in the churchyard of St. Giles', Cripplegate. She is described in that registry by her maiden name, and there is a plain headstone in a

corner of the ground, inscribed with the name of Susan Meynell, who died July 14th, 1835, much lamented; and then the text about 'the one sinner that repenteth,' and so on," said Mr. Sheldon, as if he did not care to dwell on so hackneyed a truism.

"But," I began, "she might have been married, in spite of—"

"Yes, she might," replied my Sheldon captiously; "but then, you see, the probability is that she wasn't. If she had been married, she would have told her sister as much in that last letter, or she would have said as much when they met."

"But she was delirious."

"Not all the time. She was sensible enough to talk about her sorrow for the past, and so on; and she must have been sensible enough to have spoken of her children, if she had ever had any. Besides, if she had been married, she would scarcely have been wandering about the world in that miserable manner, unless her husband was an uncommonly bad lot. No, Hawkehurst, depend

upon it we've nothing to fear in that quarter. The person we have to fear is that precious brother of mine."

"You talked the other day about driving a bargain with him," I said; "I didn't quite understand your meaning. The fortune can only be claimed by Char—Miss Halliday, and your brother has no legal authority to dispose of her money."

"Of course not," answered my employer, with contemptuous impatience of my dulness; "but my brother Phil is not the man to wait for legal power. His ideas will be Miss Halliday's ideas in this business. When my case is ripe for action I shall make my bargain—half the fortune to be mine from the day of its recovery. A deed containing these conditions must be executed by Charlotte Halliday before I hand over a single document relating to the case. Now, as matters stand at present," he went on, looking very fixedly at me, "her execution of that deed would rest with Philip."

"And when shall you make your overtures to

Mr. Sheldon?" I asked, at a loss to understand that intent look.

"Not until the last links of the chain are put together. Not before I'm ready to make my first move on the Chancellor's chessboard. Perhaps not at all."

"How do you mean?"

"If I can tide over for a little time, I may throw Philip overboard altogether, and get someone else to manage Miss Halliday for me."

"What do you mean?"

"I'll tell you, Hawkehurst," answered my patron, resting his elbows on the table by which we were sitting, and looking me through with those penetrating black eyes of his. "My brother Phil played me a shabby trick a few years ago, which I have not forgotten or forgiven. So I shouldn't mind paying him out in some of his own coin. Beyond which, I tell you again, I don't like the idea of his having a finger in this business. Where that kind of man's finger can go, his whole hand will follow; and if once that hand fastens on John Haygarth's money, it'll be

bad times for you and me. Miss Halliday counts for exactly nothing in my way of reckoning. If her stepfather told her to sign away half a million, she'd scribble her name at the bottom of the paper, and press her pretty little thumb upon the wafer, without asking a single question as to the significance of the document. And, of course, she'd be still less inclined to make objections if it was her husband who asked her to execute the deed. Aha! my young friend, how is it you grow first red and then white when I mention Miss Halliday's husband?"

I have no doubt that I did indeed blanch when that portentous word was uttered in conjunction with my darling's name. Mr. Sheldon leant a little further across the table, and his hard black eyes penetrated a little deeper into the recesses of my foolish heart.

"Valentine Hawkehurst," he said, "shall we throw my brother Phil overboard altogether? Shall you and I go shares in this fortune?"

"Upon my word and honour I don't understand you," I said in all sincerity.

"You mean that you won't understand me," answered George Sheldon impatiently; "but I'll make myself pretty clear presently; and as your own interest is at stake, you'll be very unlike the rest of your species if you don't find it easy enough to understand me. When first I let you in for the chance of a prize out of this business, neither you nor I had the slightest idea that circumstances would throw the rightful claimant to the Haygarth estate so completely into our way. I had failed so many times with other cases before I took up this case, that it's a wonder I had the courage to work on. But, somehow or other, I had a notion that this particular business would turn up trumps. The way seemed a little clearer than it usually is; but not clear enough to tempt Tom, Dick, and Harry. And then, again, I had learnt a good many secrets from the experience of my failures. I was well up to my work. I might have carried it on, and I ought to have carried it on, without help; but I was getting worn out and lazy, so I let you into my secret, having taken it into my head that I could venture to trust you."

"You didn't trust me further than you could help, my friend," I replied with my usual candour. "You never told me the amount left by the reverend intestate; but I heard that down at Ullerton. A half share in a hundred thousand pounds is worth trying for, Mr. Sheldon."

"They call it a hundred thousand down there, do they?" asked the lawyer with charming innocence. "Those country people always deal in high figures. However, I don't mind owning that the sum is a handsome one, and if you and I play our cards wisely, we may push Philip out of the game altogether, and share the plunder between us."

Again I was obliged to confess myself unable to grasp my employer's meaning.

"Marry Charlotte Halliday out of hand," he said, bringing his eyes and his elbows still nearer to me, until his bushy black whiskers almost touched my face. "Marry her before Philip gets an inkling of this affair, and then, instead of being made a tool of by him, she'll be safe in your hands, and the money will be in your hands into the bar-

gain. Why, how you stare, man! Do you think I haven't seen how the land lies between you two? Haven't I dined at Bayswater when you've been there? and could any man with his wits about him see you two sentimental young simpletons together *without* seeing how things were going on? You are in love with Charlotte, and Charlotte is in love with you. What more natural than that you two should make a match of it? Charlotte is her own mistress, and hasn't sixpence in the world that anyone but you and I know of; for, of course, my brother Phil will continue to stick to every penny of poor old Tom's money. All you have to do is to follow up the young lady; it's the course that would suggest itself to any man in the same case, even if Miss Halliday were the ugliest old harridan in Christendom, instead of being a very jolly kind of girl, as girls go."

My employer said this with the tone of a man who had never considered the genus girl a very interesting part of creation. I suppose I looked at him rather indignantly; for he laughed as he resumed:

"I'll say she's an angel, if you like," he said; "and if you think her one, so much the better. You may consider it a very lucky thing that you came in my way, and a still more lucky thing that Miss Halliday has been silly enough to fall in love with you. I've heard of men being born with silver spoons in their mouths; but I should think you must have come into the world with a whole service of plate. However, that is neither here nor there. Your policy will be to follow up your advantages; and if you can persuade the young lady to change her name for Hawkehurst on the quiet some fine morning, without stopping to ask permission of her stepfather, or anyone else, so much the better for you, and so much the more agreeable to me. I'd rather do business with you than with my brother Phil; and I sha'n't be sorry to cry quits with that gentleman for the shabby trick he played me a few years ago."

My Sheldon's brow darkened as he said this, and the moody fit returned. That old grudge which my patron entertains against his brother must have relation to some very disagreeable

business, if I may judge by George Sheldon's manner.

Here was a position for me, Valentine Hawkehurst, soldier of fortune, cosmopolitan adventurer, and child of the nomadic tribes who call Bohemia their mother country! Already blest with the sanction of my dear love's simple Yorkshire kindred, I was now assured of George Sheldon's favour; nay, urged onward in my paradisaic path by that unsentimental Mentor. The situation was almost too much for my bewildered brain. Charlotte an heiress, and George Sheldon eager to bring about my participation in the Haygarthian thousands!

And now I sit in my little room in Omega-street, pondering upon the past, and trying to face the perplexities of the future.

Is this to be? Am I, so hopeless an outsider in the race of life, to come in with a rush and win the prize which Fortune's first favourite might envy? Can I hope or believe it? Can the Fates have been playing a pleasant practical joke with me all this time, like those fairies who

decree that the young prince shall pass his childhood and youth in the guise of a wild boar, only to be transformed into an Adonis at last by the hand of the woman who is disinterested enough to love him despite his formidable tusks and ungainly figure?

No! a thousand times no! The woman I love, and the fortune I have so often desired, are not for me. Every man has his own especial Fates; and the three sisters who take care of me are grim, hard-visaged, harder-hearted spinsters, not to be mollified by propitiation, or by the smooth tongue of the flatterer. The cup is very sweet, and it seems almost within my grasp; but between that chalice of delight and the lips that thirst for it, ah, what a gulf!

Nov. 13*th.* The above was written late at night, and under the influence of my black dog. What an ill-conditioned cur he is, and how he mouths and mangles the roses that bestrew his pathway, always bent upon finding the worm at the core!

I kicked the brute out of doors this morning,

on finding a letter from my dear one lying in my plate. "Avaunt, aroint thee, foul fiend!" I cried. "Thou art the veritable poodle in whose skin Mephistopheles hides when bent on direst mischief. I will set the sign of the cross upon my threshold, and thou shalt enter no more."

This is what I said to myself as I tore open Charlotte's envelope, with its pretty little motto stamped on cream-coloured sealing-wax, "*Pensez à moi.*" Ah, love; "while memory holds a seat in this distracted globe." I saw the eyes of my friend Horatio fixed upon me as I opened my letter, and knew that my innermost sentiments were under inspection. Prudence demands all possible caution where the noble Captain is concerned. I cannot bring myself to put implicit faith in his account of his business at Ullerton. He may have been there, as he says, on some promoting spec; but our meeting in that town was, to say the least, a strange coincidence, and I am not a believer in coincidences—off the stage, where a gentleman invariably makes his appearance directly his friends begin to talk about him.

I cannot forget my conviction that Jonah Goodge was bought over by a rival investigator, and that Rebecca Haygarth's letters were tampered with; nor can I refrain from connecting that shapely but well-worn lavender glove with the person of my dandy friend, Horatio Paget. The disappearance of a letter from the packet intrusted to me by Miss Judson is another mysterious circumstance; nor can I do away with the impression that I heard the name Meynell distinctly pronounced by Philip Sheldon the last time I was at the villa.

George Sheldon tells me the secret cannot by any possibility have been betrayed, unless by me; and I have been prudence itself.

Supposing my suspicions of Mr. Goodge to be correct, the letters extracted from Mrs. Rebecca's correspondence might tell much, and might even put Horatio on the track of the Meynells. But how should he get his first inkling of the business?

Certainly not from me or from George Sheldon. But might not his attention have been attracted by that advertisement for heirs-at-law to

the Haygarthian estate which appeared in the *Times*?

These are questions with which the legal intellect of my Sheldon may best grapple. For myself, I can only drift with the resistless stream called life.

I was so unfortunate as to make my appearance in our common sitting-room five minutes after my patron. There had been time enough for him to examine the superscription and postmark of my letter. He was whistling when I went into the room. People who have been looking at things that don't belong to them always whistle.

I did not care to read Charlotte's first letter with those hawk's eyes fixed upon me. So I just glanced at the dear handwriting, as if running over an ordinary letter with the eye of indifference, and then put the document into my pocket with the best assumption of carelessness I was capable of. How I longed for the end of that tedious meal, over which Captain Paget lingered in his usual epicurean fashion!

My friend Horatio has shown himself not a little curious about my late absence from the joint domicile. I again resorted to the Dorking fiction, —my aged aunt breaking fast, and requiring much propitiation from a dutiful nephew with an eye to her testamentary arrangements. I had been compelled to endow my shadowy relative with a comfortable little bit of money, in order to account for my devotion; since the powerful mind of my Horatio would have refused to grasp the idea of disinterested affection for an ancient kinswoman.

There was an ominous twinkle in the Captain's sharp gray eyes when I gave this account of my absence, and I sorely doubt his acceptance of this second volume of the Dorking romance. Ah, what a life it is we lead in the tents of Ishmael, the castaway! through what tortuous pathways wander the nomad tribes who call Hagar, the abandoned, their mother! what lies, what evasions, what prevarications! Horatio Paget and I watch each other like two cunning fencers, with a stereotyped smile upon our lips and an eager restlessness in our eyes, and who shall say that one or other of

our rapiers is not poisoned, as in the famous duel before Claudius, usurper of Denmark?

My dear one's letter is all sweetness and love. She is coming home; and much as she prefers Yorkshire to Bayswater, she is pleased to return for my sake—for my sake. She leaves the pure atmosphere of that simple country home to become the central point in a network of intrigue; and I am bound to keep the secret so closely interwoven with her fate. I love her more truly, more purely than I thought myself capable of loving; yet I can only approach her as the tool of George Sheldon, a rapacious conspirator, bent on securing the hoarded thousands of old John Haygarth.

Of all men upon this earth I should be the last to underrate the advantages of wealth,—I who have been reared in the gutter, which is Poverty's cradle. Yet I would fain Charlotte's fortune had come to her in any other fashion than as the result of my work in the character of a salaried private inquirer.

Book the Seventh.

CHARLOTTE'S ENGAGEMENT.

CHAPTER I.

"IN YOUR PATIENCE YE ARE STRONG."

Miss Halliday returned to the gothic villa at Bayswater with a bloom on her cheeks, and a brightness in her eyes, which surpassed her wonted bloom and brightness, fair and bright as her beauty had been from the hour in which she was created to charm mankind. She had been a creature to adore even in the first dawn of infancy, and in her christening-hood and toga of white satin had been a being to dream of. But now she seemed invested all at once with a new loveliness—more spiritual, more pensive, than the old.

Might not Valentine have cried, with the rapturous pride of a lover: "Look at the woman here with the new soul!" and anon: "This new soul is mine!"

It was love that had imparted a new charm to Miss Halliday's beauty. Diana wondered at the subtle change as her friend sat in her favourite window on the morning after her return, looking dreamily out into the blossomless garden, where evergreens of the darkest and spikiest character stood up stern and straight against the cold gray sky.

Diana had welcomed her friend in her usual reserved manner, much to Charlotte's discomfiture. The girl so yearned for a confidante. She had no idea of hiding her happiness from this chosen friend, and waited eagerly for the moment in which she could put her arms round Diana's neck and tell her what it was that had made Newhall so sweet to her during this particular visit.

She sat in the window this morning thinking of Valentine, and languishing to speak of him, but at a loss how to begin. There are some people about whose necks the arms of affection can scarce entwine themselves. Diana Paget sat at her eternal embroidery-frame, picking up

beads on her needle with the precision of some self-feeding machine. The little glass beads made a hard clicking sound as they dropped from her needle,—a very frosty, unpromising sound, as it seemed to Charlotte's hyper-sensitive ear.

There had been an unwonted reserve between the girls since Charlotte's return,—a reserve which arose, on Miss Halliday's part, from the contest between girlish shyness and the eager desire for a confidante; and on the part of Miss Paget, from that gloomy discontent which had of late possessed her.

She watched Charlotte furtively as she picked up her beads,—watched her wonderingly, unable to comprehend the happiness that gave such spiritual brightness to her eyes. It was no longer the childlike gaiety of heart which had made Miss Halliday's girlhood so pleasant. It was the thoughtful, serene delight of womanhood.

"She can care very little for Valentine," Diana thought, "or she could scarcely seem so happy after such a long separation. I doubt if these bewitching women who enchant all the

world know what it is to feel deeply. Happiness is a habit with this girl. Valentine's attentions were very pleasant to her. The pretty little romance was very agreeable while it lasted; but at the first interruption of the story she shuts the book, and thinks of it no more. O, if my Creator had made *me* like that! If I could forget the days we spent together, and the dream I dreamt!"

That never-to-be-forgotten vision came back to Diana Paget as she sat at her work; and for a few minutes the clicking sound of the beads ceased, while she waited with clasped hands until the shadows should have passed before her eyes. The old dream came back to her like a picture, bright with colour and light. But the airy habitation which she had built for herself of old was no "palace lifting to Italian heavens its marble roof." It was only a commonplace lodging in a street running out of the Strand, with just a peep of the river from a trim little balcony. An airy second-floor sitting-room, with engraved portraits of the great writers on the newly-papered walls: on one side an office-desk, on the other a

work-table. The unpretending shelter of a newspaper hack, who lives *à jour la journée*, and whose wife must achieve wonders in the way of domestic economy in order to eke out his modest earnings.

This was Diana Paget's vision of Paradise, and it seemed only the brighter now that she felt it was never to be anything more than a supernal picture painted on her brain.

After sitting silent for some little time, eager to talk, but waiting to be interrogated, Charlotte was fain to break silence.

"You don't ask me whether I enjoyed myself in Yorkshire, Di," she said, looking shyly down at the little bunch of charms and lockets which employed her restless fingers.

"Didn't I, really?" replied Diana languidly; "I thought that was one of the stereotyped inquiries one always made."

"I hope you wouldn't make stereotyped inquiries of *me*, Diana."

"No, I ought not to do so. But I think there are times when one is artificial even with one's best friends. And you are my best friend, Char-

lotte. I may as well say my only friend," the girl added with a laugh.

"Diana," cried Charlotte reproachfully, "why do you speak so bitterly? You know how dearly I love you. I do indeed, dear. There is scarcely anything in this world I would not do for you. But I am not your only friend. There is Mr. Hawkehurst, whom you have known so long."

Miss Halliday's face was in a flame; and although she bent very low to examine the golden absurdities hanging on her watch-chain, she could not conceal her blushes from the eyes that were so sharpened by jealousy.

"Mr. Hawkehurst!" cried Diana, with unspeakable contempt. "If I were drowning, do you think *he* would stretch out his hand to save me while you were within his sight? When he comes to this house—he who has seen so much poverty, and misery, and shame, and—happiness with me and mine—do you think he so much as remembers my existence? Do you think he ever stops to consider whether I am that Diana Paget who was once his friend and confidante and fel-

low-wayfarer and companion? or only a lay figure dressed up to fill a vacant chair in your drawing-room?"

"Diana!"

"It is all very well to look at me reproachfully, Charlotte. You must know that I am speaking the truth. You talk of friendship. What is that word worth if it does not mean care and thought for another? Do you imagine that Valentine Hawkehurst ever thinks of me, or considers me?"

Charlotte was fain to keep silence. She remembered how very rarely in those long afternoons at Newhall farm the name of Diana Paget had been mentioned. She remembered how, when she and Valentine were mapping out the future so pleasantly, she had stopped in the midst of an eloquent bit of word-painting, descriptive of the little suburban cottage they were to live in, to dispose of Diana's fate in a sentence:

"And dear Di can stop at the villa to take care of mamma," she had said; whereupon Mr. Hawkehurst had assented with a careless nod, and

the description of the ideal cottage had been continued.

Charlotte remembered this now with extreme contrition. She had been so supremely happy, and so selfish in her happiness.

"O, Di," she cried, "how selfish happy people are!" And then she stopped in confusion, perceiving that the remark had little relevance to Diana's last observation.

"Valentine shall be your friend, dear," she said, after a pause.

"O, you are beginning to answer for him already!" exclaimed Miss Paget, with increasing bitterness.

"Diana, why are you so unkind to me?" Charlotte cried passionately. "Don't you see that I am longing to confide in you? What is it that makes you so bitter? You must know how truly I love you. And if Mr. Hawkehurst is not what he once was to you, you must remember how cold and distant you always are in your manner to him. I am sure, to hear you speak to him, and to see you look at him some-

times, one would think he was positively hateful to you. And I want you to like him a little for my sake."

Miss Halliday left her seat by the window as she said this, and went towards the table by which her friend was sitting. She crept close to Diana, and with a half-frightened, half-caressing movement, seated herself on the low ottoman at her feet, and, seated thus, possessed herself of Miss Paget's cold hand.

"I want you to like Mr. Hawkehurst a little, Di," she repeated, "for my sake."

"Very well, I will try to like him a little—for your sake," answered Miss Paget in a very unsympathetic tone.

"O, Di! tell me how it was he offended you."

"Who told you that he offended me?"

"Your own manner, dear. You could never have been so cold and distant with him—having known him so long, and endured so many troubles in his company—if you had not been deeply offended by him."

"That is your idea, Charlotte; but, you see,

I am very unlike you. I am fitful and capricious. I used to like Mr. Hawkehurst, and now I dislike him. As to offence, his whole life has offended me; just as my father's life has offended me, from first to last. I am not good and amiable and loving, like you; but I hate deceptions and lies; above all, the lies that some men traffic in day after day."

"Was Valentine's—was your father's life a very bad one?" Charlotte asked, trembling palpably, and looking up at Miss Paget's face with anxious eyes.

"Yes, it was a mean, false life,—a life of trick and artifice. I do not know the details of the schemes by which my father and Valentine earned their daily bread—and my daily bread; but I know they inflicted loss upon other people. Whether the wrong done was always done deliberately and consciously upon Valentine's part, I cannot say. He may have been only a tool of my father's. I hope he was, for the most part, an unconscious tool."

She said all this in a dreamy way, as if utter-

ing her own thoughts, rather than seeking to enlighten Charlotte.

"I am sure he was an unconscious tool," cried that young lady with an air of conviction; "it is not in his nature to do anything false or dishonourable."

"Indeed! you know him very well, it seems," said Diana.

Ah, what a tempest was raging in that proud, passionate heart! what a strife between the powers of good and evil! Pitying love for Charlotte: tender compassion for her rival's childlike helplessness: and unutterable sense of her own loss.

She had loved him so dearly, and he was taken from her. There had been a time when he almost loved her—almost! Yes, it was the remembrance of that which made the trial so bitter. The cup had approached her lips, only to be dashed away for ever.

"What did I ask in life except his love?" she said to herself. "Of all the pleasures and triumphs which girls of my age enjoy, is there one that I ever envied? No, I only sighed for his love.

To live in a lodging-house parlour with him, to sit by and watch him at his work, to drudge for him, to bear with him—this was my brightest dream of earthly bliss; and she has broken it!"

It was thus Diana argued with herself, as she sat looking down at the bright creature who had done her this worst, last wrong which one woman can do to another. This passionate heart, which ached with such cruel pain, was prone to evil, and to-day the scorpion Jealousy was digging his sharp tooth into its very core. It was not possible for Diana Paget to feel kindly disposed towards the girl whose unconscious hand had shattered the airy castle of her dreams. Was it not a hard thing that the bright creature, whom everyone was ready to adore, must needs steal away this one heart?

"It has always been like this," thought Diana. "The story of David and Nathan is a parable that is perpetually being illustrated. David is so rich—he is lord of incalculable flocks and herds; but he will not be content till he has stolen the one little ewe lamb, the poor man's pet and darling."

"Diana," said Miss Halliday very softly, "you are so difficult to talk to this morning, and I have so much to say to you."

"About your visit, or about Mr. Hawkehurst?"

"About — Yorkshire," answered Charlotte, with the air of a shy child who has made her appearance at dessert, and is asked whether she will have a pear or a peach.

"About Yorkshire!" repeated Miss Paget, with a little sigh of relief. "I shall be very glad to hear about your Yorkshire friends. Was the visit a pleasant one?"

"Very, very pleasant!" answered Charlotte, dwelling tenderly on the words.

"How sentimental you have grown, Lotta! I think you must have found a forgotten shelf of Minerva Press novels in some cupboard at your aunt's. You have lost all your vivacity."

"Have I?" murmured Charlotte; "and yet I am happier than I was when I went away. Whom do you think I met at Newhall, Di?"

"I have not the slightest idea. My notions of

Yorkshire are very vague. I fancy the people amiable savages; just a little in advance of the ancient Britons whom Julius Cæsar came over to conquer. Whom did you meet there? Some country squire, I suppose, who fell in love with your bright eyes, and wished you to waste the rest of your existence in those northern wilds."

Miss Paget was not a woman to bare her wounds for the scrutiny of the friendliest eyes. Let the tooth of the serpent bite never so keenly, she could meet her sorrows with a bold front. Was she not accustomed to suffer—she, the scapegoat of defrauded nurses and indignant landladies, the dependent and drudge of her kinswoman's gynæceum, the despised of her father? The flavour of these waters was very familiar to her lips. The draught was only a little more acrid, a little deeper, and habit had enabled her to drain the cup without complaining, if not in a spirit of resignation. To-day she had been betrayed into a brief outbreak of passion; but the storm had passed, and a more observant person than Charlotte might have been deceived by her manner.

"Now you are my own Di again," cried Miss Halliday; "somewhat cynical at the best of times, but always candid and true."

Miss Paget winced ever so little as her friend said this.

"No, dear," continued Charlotte, with the faintest spice of coquetry; "it was not a Yorkshire squire. It was a person you know very well; a person we have been talking of this morning. O, Di, you must surely have understood me when I said I wanted you to like him for my sake!"

"Valentine Hawkehurst!" exclaimed Diana.

"Who else, you dear obtuse Di!"

"He was in Yorkshire?"

"Yes, dear. It was the most wonderful thing that ever happened. He marched up to Newhall gate one morning in the course of his rambles, without having the least idea that I was to be found in the neighbourhood. Wasn't it wonderful?"

"What could have taken him to Yorkshire?"

"He came on business."

"But what business?"

"How do I know? Some business of papa's, or of George Sheldon's, perhaps. And yet that can't be. He is writing a book, I think, about geology or archæology—yes, that's it, archæology."

"Valentine Hawkehurst writing a book on archæology!" cried Miss Paget. "You must be dreaming, Charlotte."

"Why so? He does write, does he not?"

"He has been reporter for a newspaper. But he is the last person to write about archæology. I think there must be some mistake."

"Well, dear, it may be so. I didn't pay much attention to what he said about business. It seemed so strange for him to be there, just as much at home as if he had been one of the family. O, Di, you can't imagine how kind aunt Dorothy and uncle Joe were to him! They like him so much—and they know we are engaged."

Miss Halliday said these last words almost in a whisper.

"What!" exclaimed Diana, "do you mean to say that you have promised to marry this man,

of whom you know nothing but what is unfavourable?"

"What do I know in his disfavour? Ah, Diana, how unkind you are! and what a dislike you must have for poor Valentine! Of course, I know he is not what people call a good match. A good match means that one is to have a pair of horses, whose health is so uncertain that I am sure their lives must be a burden to them, if we may judge by our horses; and a great many servants, who are always conducting themselves in the most awful manner, if poor mamma's experience is any criterion; and a big expensive house, which nobody can be prevailed on to dust. No, Di! *that* is just the kind of life I hate. What I should like is a dear little cottage at Highgate or Wimbledon, and a tiny, tiny garden, in which Valentine and I could walk every morning before he began his day's work, and where we could drink tea together on summer evenings—a garden just large enough to grow a few rose-bushes. O, Di! do you think I want to marry a rich man?"

"No, Charlotte; but I should think you would like to marry a good man."

"Valentine is good. No one but a good man could have been so happy as he seemed at Newhall farm. That simple country life could not have been happiness for a bad man."

"And was Valentine Hawkehurst really happy at Newhall?"

"Really—really—really! Don't try to shake my faith in him, Diana; it is not to be shaken. He has told me a little about the past, though I can see that it pains him very much to speak of it. He has told me of his friendless youth, spent amongst unprincipled people, and what a mere waif and stray he was until he met me. And I am to be his pole-star, dear, to guide him in the right path. Do you know, Di, I cannot picture to myself anything sweeter than that—to be a good influence for the person one loves. Valentine says his whole nature has undergone a change since he has known me. What am I that I should work so good a change in my dear one? It is very foolish, is it not, Di?"

"Yes, Charlotte," replied the voice of reason from the lips of Miss Paget, "it is all foolishness from beginning to end, and I can foresee nothing but trouble as the result of such folly. What will your mamma say to such an engagement? or what will Mr. Sheldon say?"

"Yes, that is the question," returned Charlotte, very seriously. "Dear mamma is one of the kindest creatures in the world, and I'm sure she would consent to anything rather than see me unhappy. And then, you know, she likes Valentine very much, because he has given her orders for the theatres, and all that kind of thing. But, whatever mamma thinks, she will be governed by what Mr. Sheldon thinks; and of course he will be against our marriage."

"Our marriage!" It was a settled matter, then—a thing that was to be sooner or later; and there remained only the question as to how and when it was to be. Diana sat like a statue, enduring her pain. So may have suffered the Christian martyrs in their death-agony; so suffers a woman when the one dear hope of her

life is reft from her, and she dare not cry aloud.

"Mr. Sheldon is the last man in the world to permit such a marriage," she said presently.

"Perhaps," replied Charlotte; "but I am not going to sacrifice Valentine for Mr. Sheldon's pleasure. Mr. Sheldon has full power over mamma and her fortune, but he has no real authority where I am concerned. I am as free as air, Diana, and I have not a penny in the world. Is not that delightful?"

The girl asked this question in all good faith, looking up at her friend with a radiant countenance. What irony there was in the question for Diana Paget, whose whole existence had been poisoned by the lack of that sterling coin of the realm which seemed such sordid dross in the eyes of Charlotte!

"What do you mean, Charlotte?"

"I mean, that even his worst enemies cannot accuse Valentine of any mercenary feeling. He does not ask me to marry him for the sake of my fortune."

"Does he know your real position?"

"Most fully. And now, Diana, tell me that you will try to like him, for my sake: and that you will be kind, and will speak a good word for me to mamma by and by, when I have told her all."

"When do you mean to tell her?"

"Directly—or almost directly. I scarcely know how to set about it. I am sure it has been hard enough to tell you."

"My poor Charlotte! What an ungrateful wretch I must be!"

"My dear Diana, you have no reason to be grateful. I love you very dearly, and I could not live in this house without you. It is I who have reason to be grateful, when I remember how you bear with mamma's fidgety ways, and with Mr. Sheldon's gloomy temper, and all for love of me."

"Yes, Lotta, for love of you," Miss Paget answered with a sigh; "and I will do more than that for love of you."

She had her arm round her happy rival's

beautiful head, and she was looking down at the sweet upturned face with supreme tenderness. She felt no anger against this fair enslaver, who had robbed her of her little lamb. She only felt some touch of anger against the Providence which had decreed that the lamb should be so taken.

No suspicion of her friend's secret entered Charlotte Halliday's mind. In all their intercourse Diana had spoken very little of Valentine; and in the little she had said there had been always the same half-bitter, half-disdainful tone. Charlotte in her simple candour accepted this tone as the evidence of Miss Paget's aversion to her father's protégé.

"Poor Di does not like to see her father give so much of his friendship to a stranger, while she is neglected," thought Miss Halliday; and having once jumped at this conclusion, she made no further effort to penetrate the mysteries of Diana's mind.

She was less than ever inclined to speculation about Diana's feelings now that she was in love, and blest with the sweet consciousness that her

love was returned. Tender and affectionate as she was, she could not quite escape that taint of egotism which is the ruling vice of fortunate lovers. Her mind was not wide enough to hold much more than one image, which demanded so large a space.

CHAPTER II.

MRS. SHELDON ACCEPTS HER DESTINY.

Miss Halliday had an interview with her mother that evening in Mrs. Sheldon's dressing-room, while that lady was preparing for rest, with considerable elaboration of detail in the way of hair-brushing, and putting away of neck-ribbons and collars and trinkets in smart little boxes and handy little drawers, all more or less odorous from the presence of dainty satin-covered sachets. The sachets, and the drawers, and boxes, and trinkets were Mrs. Sheldon's best anchorage in this world. Such things as these were the things that made life worth endurance for this poor weak little woman: and they were more real to her than her daughter, because more easy to realise. The beautiful light-hearted girl was a being whose existence had been always something of a problem for

Georgina Sheldon. She loved her after her own feeble fashion, and would have jealously asserted her superiority over every other daughter in the universe; but the power to understand her or to sympathise with her had not been given to that narrow mind. The only way in which Mrs. Sheldon's affection showed itself was unquestioning indulgence and the bestowal of frivolous gifts, chosen with no special regard to Charlotte's requirements, but rather because they happened to catch Mrs. Sheldon's eye as they glittered or sparkled in the windows of Bayswater repositories.

Mr. Sheldon happened to be dining out on this particular evening. He was a guest at a great City feast, to which some of the richest men upon 'Change had been bidden; so Miss Halliday had an excellent opportunity for making her confession.

Poor Georgy was not a little startled by the avowal.

"My darling Lotta!" she screamed, "do you think your papa would ever consent to such a thing?"

"I think my dear father would have con-

sented to anything likely to secure my happiness, mamma," the girl answered sadly.

She was thinking how different this crisis in her life would have seemed if the father she had loved so dearly had been spared to help and counsel her.

"I was not thinking of my poor dear first husband," said Georgy. This numbering of her husbands was always unpleasant to Charlotte. It seemed such a very business-like mode of description to be applied to the father she so deeply regretted.

"I was thinking of your step-papa," continued Mrs. Sheldon. "He would never consent to your marrying Mr. Hawkehurst, who really seems to have nothing to recommend him except his good looks and an obliging disposition with regard to orders for the theatres."

"I am not bound to consult my stepfather's wishes. I only want to please you, mamma."

"But, my dear, I cannot possibly consent to anything that Mr. Sheldon disapproves."

"O, mamma, dear kind mamma, do have an

opinion of your own for once in a way! I dare-say Mr. Sheldon is the best possible judge of everything connected with the Stock Exchange and the money-market; but don't let him choose a husband for me. Let me have your approval, mamma, and I care for no one else. I don't want to marry against your will. But I am sure you like Mr. Hawkehurst."

Mrs. Sheldon shook her head despondingly.

"It's all very well to like an agreeable young man as an occasional visitor," she said, "especially when most of one's visitors are middle-aged City people. But it is a very different thing when one's only daughter talks of marrying him. I can't imagine what can have put such an idea as marriage into your head. It is only a few months since you came home from school; and I fancied that you would have stopped with me for years before you thought of settling."

Miss Halliday made a wry face.

"Dear mamma," she said, "I don't want to 'settle.' That is what one's housemaid says, isn't it, when she talks of leaving service and marrying

some young man from the baker's or the grocer's? Valentine and I are not in a hurry to be married. I am sure, for my own part, I don't care how long our engagement lasts. I only wish to be quite candid and truthful with you, mamma; and I thought it a kind of duty to tell you that he loves me, and that—I love him—very dearly."

These last words were spoken with extreme shyness.

Mrs. Sheldon laid down her hair-brushes while she contemplated her daughter's blushing face. Those blushes had become quite a chronic affection with Miss Halliday of late.

"But, good gracious me, Charlotte," she exclaimed, growing peevish in her sense of helplessness, "who is to tell Mr. Sheldon?"

"There is no necessity for Mr. Sheldon to be enlightened yet awhile, mamma. It is to you I owe duty and obedience—not to him. Pray keep my secret, kindest and most indulgent of mothers, and—and ask Valentine to come and see you now and then."

"Ask him to come and see me, Charlotte

You must know very well that I never invite anyone to dinner except at Mr. Sheldon's wish. I am sure I quite tremble at the idea of a dinner. There is such trouble about the waiting, and such dreadful uncertainty about the cooking. And if one has it all done by Birch's people, one's cook gives warning next morning," added poor Georgy, with a dismal recollection of recent perplexities. "I am sure I often wish myself young again, in the dairy at Hyley farm, making matrimony cakes for a tea-party, with a ring and a fourpenny-piece hidden in the middle. I'm sure the Hyley tea-parties were pleasanter than Mr. Sheldon's dinners, with those solemn City people, who can't exist without clear turtle and red mullet."

"Ah, mother dear, our lives were altogether happier in those days. I delight in the Yorkshire tea-parties, and the matrimony cakes, and all the talk and laughter about the fourpenny-piece and the ring. I remember getting the fourpenny-piece at Newhall last year. And that means that one is to die an old maid, you know. And now I am engaged. As to the dinners, mamma, Mr.

Sheldon may keep them all for himself and his City friends. Valentine is the last person in the world to care for clear turtle. If you will let him drop in sometimes of an afternoon—say once a week or so—when you, and I, and Diana are sitting at our work in the drawing-room, and if you will let him hand us our cups at our five-o'clock tea, he will be the happiest of men. He adores tea. You'll let him come, won't you, dear? O, mamma, I feel just like a servant who asks to be allowed to see her 'young man.' Will you let my 'young man' come to tea, once in a way?"

"Well, Charlotte, I'm sure I don't know," said Mrs. Sheldon, with increasing helplessness. "It's really a very dreadful position for me to be placed in."

"Quite appalling, is it not, mamma? But then I suppose it is a position that people afflicted with daughters must come to sooner or later."

"If it were the mere civility of asking him to tea," pursued poor Georgy, heedless of this flippant interruption, "I'm sure I should be the last to make any objection. Indeed, I am under a

kind of obligation to Mr. Hawkehurst, for his polite attention has enabled us to go to the theatres very often when your papa would not have thought of buying tickets. But then, you see, Lotta, the question in point is not his coming to our five-o'clock tea—which seems really a perfect mockery to anyone brought up in Yorkshire—but whether you are to be engaged to him."

"Dear mamma, *that* is not a question at all, for I am already engaged to him."

"But, Charlotte—"

"I do not think I could bring myself to disobey you, dear mother," continued the girl tenderly; "and if you tell me, of your own free will, and acting on your own conviction, that I am not to marry him, I must bow my head to your decision, however hard it may seem. But one thing is quite certain, mamma: I have given my promise to Valentine; and if I do not marry him, I shall never marry at all; and then the dreadful augury of the fourpenny-piece will be verified."

Miss Halliday pronounced this determination with a decision of manner that quite overawed her

mother. It had been the habit of Georgy's mind to make a feeble protest against all the mutations of life, but in the end to submit very quietly to the inevitable; and since Valentine Hawkehurst's acceptance as Charlotte's future husband seemed inevitable, she was fain to submit in this instance also.

Valentine was allowed to call at the Lawn, and was received with a feeble, half-plaintive graciousness by the lady of the house. He was invited to stop for the five-o'clock tea, and availed himself rapturously of this delightful privilege. His instinct told him what gentle hand had made the meal so dainty and home-like, and for whose pleasure the phantasmal pieces of bread-and-butter usually supplied by the trim parlour-maid had given place to a salver loaded with innocent delicacies in the way of pound-cake and apricot jam.

Mr. Hawkehurst did his uttermost to deserve so much indulgence. He scoured London in search of free admissions for the theatres, hunting "Ragamuffins" and members of the Cibber

Club, and other privileged creatures, at all their places of resort. He watched for the advent of novels adapted to Georgy's capacity—lively records of croquet and dressing and love-making, from smart young Amazons in the literary ranks, or deeply interesting romances of the sensation school, with at least nine deaths in the three volumes, and a comic housemaid, or a contumacious "Buttons," to relieve the gloom by their playful waggeries. He read Tennyson or Owen Meredith, or carefully selected 'bits' from the works of a younger and wilder bard, while the ladies worked industriously at their prie-dieu chairs, or Berlin brioches, or Shetland couvre-pieds, as the case might be. The patroness of a fancy fair would scarcely have smiled approvingly on the novel effects in *crochet à tricoter* produced by Miss Halliday during these pleasant lectures.

"The rows *will* come wrong," she said piteously, "and Tennyson's poetry is so very absorbing!"

Mr. Hawkehurst showed himself to be pos-

sessed of honourable, not to say delicate, feelings in his new position. The gothic villa was his paradise, and the gates had been freely opened to admit him whensoever he chose to come. Georgy was just the sort of person from whom people take ells after having asked for inches; and once having admitted Mr. Hawkehurst as a privileged guest, she would have found it very difficult to place any restriction upon the number of his visits. Happily for this much-perplexed matron Charlotte and her lover were strictly honourable. Mr. Hawkehurst never made his appearance at the villa more than once in the same week, though the "once a week or so" asked for by Charlotte might have been stretched to a wider significance.

When Valentine obtained orders for the theatre, he sent them by post, scrupulously refraining from making them the excuse for a visit.

"That was all very well when I was a freebooter," he said to himself, "only admitted on sufferance, and liable to have the door shut in my face any morning. But I am trusted now,

and I must prove myself worthy of my future mother-in-law's confidence. Once a week! One seventh day of unspeakable happiness—bliss without alloy! The six other days are very long and dreary. But then they are only the lustreless setting in which that jewel the seventh shines so gloriously. Now, if I were Waller, what verses I would sing about my love! Alas, I am only a commonplace young man, and can find no new words in which to tell the old sweet story!"

If the orders for stalls and private boxes were not allowed to serve as an excuse for visits, they at least necessitated the writing of letters; and no human being, except a lover, would have been able to understand why such long letters must needs be written about such a very small business. The letters secured replies; and when the order sent was for a box, Mr. Hawkehurst was generally invited to occupy a seat in it. Ah, what did it matter on those happy nights how hackneyed the plot of the play, how bald the dialogue, how indifferent the acting! It was all alike delightful to those two spectators: for a

light that shone neither on earth nor sky brightened everything they looked on when they sat side by side.

And during all these pleasant afternoons at the villa, or evenings at the theatre, Diana Paget had to sit by and witness the happiness which she had dreamed might some day be hers. It was a part of her duty to be present on these occasions, and she performed that duty punctiliously. She might have made excuses for absenting herself, but she was too proud to make any such excuses.

"Am I such a coward as to tell a lie in order to avoid a little pain more or less? If I say I have a headache, and stay in my own room while he is here, will the afternoon seem any more pleasant or any shorter to me? The utmost difference would be the difference between a dull pain and a sharp pain; and I think the sharper agony is easier to bear."

Having argued with herself thus, Miss Paget endured her weekly martyrdom with Spartan fortitude.

"What have I lost?" she said to herself, as she stole a furtive glance now and then at the familiar face of her old companion. "What is this treasure, the loss of which makes me seem to myself such an abject wretch? Only the love of a man who at his best is not worthy of this girl's pure affection, and at his worst must have been unworthy even of mine. But then at his worst he is dearer to me than the best man who ever lived upon this earth."

CHAPTER III.

MR. HAWKEHURST AND MR. GEORGE SHELDON COME TO AN UNDERSTANDING.

THERE was no such thing as idleness for Valentine Hawkehurst during these happy days of his courtship. The world was his oyster, and that oyster was yet unopened. For some years he had been hacking and hewing the shell thereof with the sword of the freebooter, to very little advantageous effect. He now set himself seriously to work with the pickaxe of the steady-going labourer. He was a secessionist from the great army of adventurers. He wanted to enrol himself in the ranks of the respectable, the plodders, the rate-payers, the simple citizens who love their wives and children, and go to their parish church on Sundays. He had an incentive to steady in-

dustry which had hitherto been wanting in his life. He was beloved, and any shame that came to him would be a still more bitter humiliation for the woman who loved him.

He felt that the very first step in the difficult path of respectability would be a step that must separate him from Captain Paget; but just now separation from that gentleman seemed scarcely advisable. If there was any mischief in that Ullerton expedition, any collusion between the Captain and the Reverend Goodge, it would assuredly be well for Valentine to continue a mode of life which enabled him to be tolerably well informed as to the movements of the slippery Horatio. In all the outside positions of life expedience must ever be the governing principle; and expedience forbade any immediate break with Captain Paget.

"Whatever you do, keep your eye upon the Captain," said George Sheldon, in one of many interviews, all bearing upon the Haygarth succession. "If there is any underhand work going on between him and Philip, you must be uncommonly slow of perception if you can't ferret it out.

I'm very sorry you met Charlotte Halliday in the north, for of course Phil must have heard of your appearance in Yorkshire, and that will set him wondering at any rate, especially as he will no doubt have heard the Dorking story from Paget. He pretended he saw you leave town the day you went to Ullerton, but I am half-inclined to believe that was only a trap."

"I don't think Mr. Sheldon has heard of my appearance in Yorkshire yet."

"Indeed! Miss Charlotte doesn't care to make a confidant of her stepfather, I suppose. Keep her in that mind, Hawkehurst. If you play your cards well, you ought to be able to get her to marry you on the quiet."

"I don't think that would be possible. In fact, I am sure Charlotte would not marry without her mother's consent," answered Valentine thoughtfully.

"And of course that means my brother Philip's consent," exclaimed George Sheldon with contemptuous impatience. "What a slow, bungling fellow you are, Hawkehurst! Here is an im-

mense fortune waiting for you, and a pretty girl in love with you, and you dawdle and deliberate as if you were going to the dentist's to have a tooth drawn. You've fallen into a position that any man in London might envy, and you don't seem to have the smallest capability of appreciating your good luck."

"Well, perhaps I am rather slow to realise the idea of my good fortune," answered Valentine still very thoughtfully. "You see, in the first place, I can't get over a shadowy kind of feeling with regard to that Haygarthian fortune. It is too far away from my grasp, too large, too much of the stuff that dreams and novels are made of. And in the second place, I love Miss Halliday so fondly and so truly that I don't like the notion of making my marriage with her any part of the bargain between you and me."

Mr. Sheldon contemplated his confederate with unmitigated disdain. "Don't try that sort of thing with me, Hawkehurst," he said; "that sentimental dodge may answer very well with some men, but I'm about the last to be taken in by it.

You are playing fast-and-loose with me, and you want to throw me over—as my brother Phil would throw me over if he got the chance."

"I am not playing fast-and-loose with you," replied Valentine, too disdainful of Mr. Sheldon for indignation. "I have worked for you faithfully, and kept your secret honourably, when I had every temptation to reveal it. You drove your bargain with me, and I have performed my share of the bargain to the letter. But if you think I am going to drive a bargain with you about my marriage with Miss Halliday, you are very much mistaken. That lady will marry me when she pleases, but she shall not be entrapped into a clandestine marriage for your convenience."

"O, that's your ultimatum is it, Mr. Joseph Surface?" said the lawyer, biting his nails fiercely, and looking askant at his ally with angry eyes. "I wonder you don't wind up by saying that the man who could trade upon a virtuous woman's affection for the advancement of his fortune deserves to—get it hot, as our modern slang has it.

Then I am to understand that you decline to precipitate matters?"

"I most certainly do."

"And the Haygarth business is to remain in abeyance while Miss Halliday goes through the tedious formula of a sentimental courtship?"

"I suppose so."

"Humph! that's pleasant for me."

"Why should you make the advancement of Miss Halliday's claims contingent on her marriage? Why not assert her rights at once?"

"Because I will not trust my brother Philip. The day that you show me the certificate of your marriage with Charlotte Halliday is the day on which I shall make my first move in this business. I told you the other day that I would rather make a bargain with you than with my brother."

"And what kind of bargain do you expect to make with me when Miss Halliday is my wife?"

"I'll tell you, Valentine Hawkehurst," replied the lawyer, squaring his elbows upon his desk in his favourite attitude, and looking across the table at his coadjutor; "I like to be open and above-

board when I can, and I'll be plain with you in this matter. I want a clear half of John Haygarth's fortune, and I think that I've a very fair claim to that amount. The money can only be obtained by means of the documents in my possession, and but for me that money might have remained till doomsday unclaimed and unthought of by the descendant of Matthew Haygarth. Look at it which way you will, I think you'll allow that my demand is a just one."

"I don't say that it is unjust, though it certainly seems a little extortionate," replied Valentine. "However, if Charlotte were my wife and were willing to cede half the fortune, I'm not the man to dispute the amount of your reward. When the time comes for bargain-driving, you'll not find me a difficult person to deal with."

"And when may I expect your marriage with Miss Halliday?" asked George Sheldon, rapping his hard finger-nails upon the table with suppressed impatience. "Since you elect to conduct matters in the grand style, and must wait for mamma's consent and papa's consent, and good-

ness knows what else in the way of absurdity, I suppose the delay will be for an indefinite space of time."

"I don't know about that. I am not likely to put off the hour in which I shall call that dear girl my own. I asked her to be my wife before I knew that she had the blood of Matthew Haygarth in her veins, and the knowledge of her claim to this fortune does not make her one whit the dearer to me, penniless adventurer as I am. If poetry were at all in your line, Mr. Sheldon, you might know that a man's love for a good woman is generally better than himself. He may be a knave and a scoundrel, and yet his love for that one perfect creature may be almost as pure and perfect as herself. That's a psychological mystery out of the way of Gray's Inn, isn't it?"

"If you'll oblige me by talking common sense for about five minutes, you may devote your powerful intellect to the consideration of psychological mysteries for a month at a stretch," exclaimed the aggravated lawyer.

"O, don't you see how I struggle to be hard-

headed and practical!" cried Valentine; "but a man who is over head and ears in love finds it rather hard to bring all his ideas to the one infallible grindstone. You ask me when I am to marry Charlotte Halliday. To-morrow, if our Fates smile upon us. Mrs. Sheldon knows of our engagement, and consents to it, but in some manner under protest. I am not to take my dear girl away from her mother for some time to come. The engagement is to be a long one. In the mean time I am working hard to gain some kind of position in literature, for I want to be sure of an income before I marry, without reference to John Haygarth; and I am a privileged guest at the villa."

"But my brother Phil has been told nothing?"

"As yet nothing. My visits are paid while he is in the City; and as I often went to the villa before my engagement, he is not likely to suspect anything when he happens to hear my name mentioned as a visitor."

"And do you really think he is in the dark—my brother Philip, who can turn a man's brains

inside out in half an hour's conversation? Mark my words, Valentine Hawkehurst, that man is only playing with you as a cat plays with a mouse. He used to see you and Charlotte together before you went to Yorkshire, and he must have seen the state of the case quite as plainly as I saw it. He has heard of your visits to the villa since your return, and has kept a close account of them, and made his own deductions, depend upon it. And some day, while you and pretty Miss Charlotte are enjoying your fool's paradise, he will pounce upon you just as puss pounces on poor mousy."

This was rather alarming, and Valentine felt that it was very likely to be correct.

"Mr. Sheldon may play the part of puss as he pleases," he replied after a brief pause for deliberation; "this is a case in which he dare not show his claws. He has no authority to control Miss Halliday's actions."

"Perhaps not, but he would find means for preventing her marriage if it was to his interest to do so. He is not *your* brother, you see, Mr. Hawkehurst; but he is mine, and I know a good

deal about him. His interest may not be concerned in hindering his stepdaughter's marriage with a penniless scapegrace. He may possibly prefer such a bridegroom as less likely to make himself obnoxious by putting awkward questions about poor Tom Halliday's money, every sixpence of which he means to keep, of course. If his cards are packed for that kind of marriage, he'll welcome you to his arms as a son-in-law, and give you his benediction as well as his stepdaughter. So I think if you can contrive to inform him of your engagement, without letting him know of your visit to Yorkshire, it might be a stroke of diplomacy. He might be glad to get rid of the girl, and might hasten on the marriage of his own volition."

"He might be glad to get rid of the girl." In the ears of Valentine Hawkehurst this sounded rank blasphemy. Could there be anyone upon this earth, even a Sheldon, incapable of appreciating the privilege of that divine creature's presence?

CHAPTER IV.

MR. SHELDON IS PROPITIOUS.

It was not very long before Valentine Hawkehurst had reason to respect the wisdom of his legal patron. Within a few days of his interview with George Sheldon he paid his weekly visit to the villa. Things were going very well with him, and life altogether seemed brighter than he had ever hoped to find it. He had set himself steadily to work to win some kind of position in literature. He devoted his days to diligent study in the reading-room of the British Museum, his nights to writing for the magazines. His acquaintance with press-men had stood him in good stead; and already he had secured the prompt acceptance of his work in more than one direction. The young littérateur of the present day has not such a very hard fight for a livelihood, if his pen has only a

certain lightness and dash, a rattling vivacity and airy grace. It is only the marvellous boys who come to London with epic poems, Anglo-Saxon tragedies, or metaphysical treatises in their portmanteaus, who must needs perish in their prime, or stoop to the drudgery of office or counting-house.

Valentine Hawkehurst had no vague yearnings after the fame of a Milton, no inner consciousness that he had been born to stamp out the footprints of Shakespeare on the sands of time, no unhealthy hungering after the gloomy grandeur of Byron. He had been brought up amongst people who treated literature as a trade as well as an art;—and what art is not more or less a trade? He knew the state of the market and what kind of goods were likely to go off briskly, and it was for the market he worked. When gray shirtings were in active demand, he set his loom for gray shirtings; and when the buyers clamoured for fancy goods, he made haste to produce that class of fabrics. In this he proved himself a very low-minded and ignominious creature, no doubt; but

was not one Oliver Goldsmith glad to take any order which good Mr. Newberry might give him, only writing the *Traveller* and the story of Parson Primrose *pour se distraire?*

Love lent wings to the young essayist's pen. It is to be feared that in roving among those shelves in Great Russell-street he showed himself something of a freebooter, taking his "bien" wherever it was to be found; but did not Molière frankly acknowledge the same practice? Mr. Hawkehurst wrote about anything and everything. His brain must needs be a gigantic storehouse of information, thought the respectful reader. He skipped from Pericles to Cromwell, from Cleopatra to Mary Stuart, from Sappho to Madame de Sablé; and he wrote of these departed spirits with such a charming impertinence, with such a delicious affectation of intimacy, that one would have thought he had sat by Cleopatra as she melted her pearls, and stood amongst the audience of Pericles when he pronounced his funeral oration. With the De Sablé and the Chevreuse, Ninon and Marion, Maintenon and La Vallière,

Anne of Austria and the great Mademoiselle of France, he seemed to have lived in daily companionship, so amply did he expatiate upon the smallest details of their existences, so tenderly did he dwell on their vanished beauties, their unforgotten graces.

The work was light and pleasant; and the monthly cheques from the proprietors of a couple of rival periodicals promised to amount to the income which the adventurer had sighed for as he trod the Yorkshire moorland. He had asked Destiny to give him Charlotte Halliday and three hundred a year, and lo! while yet the wish was new, both these blessings seemed within his grasp. It could scarcely be a matter for repining if the Fates should choose to throw in an odd fifty thousand pounds or so.

But was not all this something too much of happiness for a man whose feet had trodden in evil ways? Were not the Fates mocking this travel-stained wayfarer with bright glimpses of a paradise whose gates he was never to pass?

This was the question which Valentine Hawke-

hurst was fain to ask himself sometimes; this doubt was the shadow which sometimes made a sudden darkness that obscured the sunshine.

Happily for Charlotte's true lover, the shadow did not often come between him and the light of those dear eyes which were his pole-stars.

The December days were shortening as the year drew to its close, and afternoon tea seemed more than ever delightful to Charlotte and her betrothed, now that it could be enjoyed in the mysterious half light; a glimmer of chill gray day looking coldly in at the unshrouded window like some ghostly watcher envying these mortals their happiness, and the red glow of the low fire reflected upon every curve and facet of the shining steel grate.

To sit by the fire at five o'clock in the afternoon, watching the changeful light upon Charlotte's face, the rosy glow that seemed to linger caressingly on broad low brow and sweet ripe lips, the deep shadows that darkened eyes and hair, was bliss unspeakable for Mr. Hawkehurst. The lovers talked the prettiest nonsense to each other,

while Mrs. Sheldon dozed placidly behind the friendly shelter of a banner-screen hooked on to the chimney-piece, or conversed with Diana in a monotonous undertone, solemnly debating the relative wisdom of dyeing or turning in relation to a faded silk dress.

Upon one special evening Valentine lingered just a little longer than usual. Christmas was near at hand, and the young man had brought his liege lady tribute in the shape of a bundle of Christmas literature. Tennyson had been laid aside in favour of the genial Christmas fare, which had the one fault, that it came a fortnight before the jovial season, and in a manner forestalled the delights of that time-honoured period, making the season itself seem flat and dull, and turkey and plum-pudding the stalest commodities in the world when they did come. How, indeed, can a man do full justice to his aunt Tabitha's plum-pudding, or his uncle Joe's renowned rum-punch, if he has quaffed the steaming-bowl with the Seven Poor Travellers, or eaten his Christmas dinner at the Kiddleawink a fortnight beforehand? Are not

the chief pleasures of life joys as perishable as the bloom on a peach or the freshness of a rose?

Valentine had read the ghastliest of ghost-stories, and the most humorous of word-pictures, for the benefit of the audience in Mrs. Sheldon's drawing-room; and now, after tea, they sat by the fire talking of the ghost-story, and discussing that unanswerable question about the possibility of such spiritual appearances which seems to have been debated ever since the world began.

"Dr. Johnson believed in ghosts," said Valentine.

"O, please spare us Dr. Johnson," cried Charlotte with serio-comic intensity. "What is it that obliges magazine-writers to be perpetually talking about Dr. Johnson? If they must dig up persons from the past, why can't they dig up newer persons than that poor ill-used doctor?"

The door opened with a hoarse groan, and Mr. Sheldon came into the room while Miss Halliday was making her playful protest. She stopped, somewhat confused by that sudden entrance.

There is a statue of the Commandant in every

house, at whose coming hearts grow cold and lips are suddenly silent. It was the first time that the master of the villa had interrupted one of these friendly afternoon teas, and Mrs. Sheldon and her daughter felt that a domestic crisis was at hand.

"How's this?" cried the stockbroker's strong hard voice; "you seem all in the dark."

He took a wax-match from a little gilt stand on the mantelpiece and lighted two flaring lamps. He was the sort of man who is always eager to light the gas when people are sitting in the gloaming, meditative and poetical. He let the broad glare of common sense in upon their foolish musings, and scared away Robin Goodfellow and the fairies by means of the Western Gaslight Company's illuminating medium.

The light of those two flaring jets of gas revealed Charlotte Halliday looking shyly at the roses on the carpet, and trifling nervously with one of the show-books on the table. The same light revealed Valentine Hawkehurst standing by the young lady's chair, and looking at Mr. Sheldon with a boldness of countenance that was

almost defiance. Poor Georgy's face peered out from behind her favourite banner-screen, looking from one to the other in evident alarm. Diana sat in her accustomed corner, watchful, expectant, awaiting the domestic storm.

To the surprise of everyone except Mr. Sheldon, there was no storm, not even the lightest breeze that ever blew in domestic hemispheres. The stockbroker saluted his stepdaughter with a friendly nod, and greeted her lover with a significant grin.

"How d'ye do, Hawkehurst?" he said in his pleasantest manner. "It's an age since I've seen you. You're going in for literature, I hear; and a very good thing too, if you can make it pay. I understand there are some fellows who really do make that sort of thing pay. Seen my brother George lately? Yes, I suppose you and George are quite a Damon and What's-his-name. You're going to dine here to-night, of course? I suppose we may go in to dinner at once, eh, Georgy?—it's half-past six."

Mr. Hawkehurst made some faint pretence of

having a particular engagement elsewhere; for, supposing Sheldon to be unconscious, he scorned to profit by that gentleman's ignorance. And then, having faltered his refusal, he looked at Charlotte, and Charlotte's eyes cried "Stay," as plainly as such lovely eyes can speak. So the end of it was, that he stayed and partook of the Sheldonian crimped skate, and the Sheldonian roast-beef and tapioca-pudding, and tasted some especial Moselle, which, out of the kindliness of his nature, Mr. Sheldon opened for his step-daughter's betrothed.

After dinner there were oranges and crisp uncompromising biscuits that made an explosive noise like the breaking of windows whenever anyone ventured to tamper with them; item, a decanter of sherry in a silver stand; item, a decanter of port, which Mr. Sheldon declared to be something almost too good to be drunk, and to the merits of which Valentine was supremely indifferent. The young man would fain have followed his delight when she accompanied her mamma and Diana to the drawing-room; but Mr. Sheldon detained him.

"I want a few words with you, Hawkehurst," he said; and Charlotte's cheeks flamed red as peonies at sound of this alarming sentence. "You shall go after the ladies presently, and they shall torture that poor little piano to their heart's delight for your edification. I won't detain you many minutes. You had really better try that port."

Valentine closed the door upon the departing ladies, and went back to his seat very submissively. If there were any battle to be fought out between him and Philip Sheldon, the sooner the trumpet sounded to arms the better.

"His remarkable civility almost inclines me to think that he does really want to get rid of that dear girl," Valentine said to himself, as he filled his glass and gravely awaited Mr. Sheldon's pleasure.

"Now then, my dear Hawkehurst," began that gentleman, squaring himself in his comfortable arm-chair, and extending his legs before the cheery fire, "let us have a little friendly chat. I am not given to beating about the bush, you know, and whatever I have to say I shall say in

very plain words. In the first place, I hope you have not so poor an opinion of my perceptive faculties as to suppose that I don't see what is going on between you and Miss Lotta yonder."

"My dear Mr. Sheldon, I—"

"Hear what I have to say first, and make your protestations afterwards. You needn't be alarmed; you won't find me quite as bad as the stepmother one reads about in the story-books, who puts her stepdaughter into a pie, and all that kind of thing. I suppose stepfathers have been a very estimable class, by the way, as it is the stepmother who always drops in for it in the story-books. You'll find me very easy to deal with, Mr. Hawkehurst, always provided that you deal in a fair and honourable manner."

"I have no wish to be underhand in my dealings," Valentine said boldly. And indeed this was the truth. His inclination prompted him to candour, even with Mr. Sheldon; but that fatal necessity which is the governing principle of the adventurer's life obliged him to employ the arts of finesse.

"Good," cried Mr. Sheldon in the cheery, pleasant tone of an easy-going man of the world who is not too worldly to perform a generous action once in a way. "All I ask is frankness. You and Charlotte have fallen in love with one another—why, I can't imagine, except on the hypothesis that a decent-looking young woman and a decent-looking young man can't meet half-a-dozen times without beginning to think of Gretna-green or St. George's Hanover-square. Of course a marriage with you, looked at from a common-sense point of view, would be about the worst thing that could happen to my wife's daughter. She's a very fine girl" (a man of the Sheldonian type would call Aphrodité herself a fine girl), "and might marry some awfully rich City swell with vineries and pineries and succession-houses at Tulse-hill or Highgate, if I chose to put her in the way of that sort of thing. But then, you see, the worst of it is, a man seldom comes to vineries and pineries at Tulse-hill till he is on the shady side of forty; and as I am not in favour of mercenary marriages, I don't care to

force any of my City connection upon poor Lotta. In the neighbourhood of the Stock Exchange there is no sharper man of business than your humble servant; but I don't care to bring business habits to Bayswater. Long before Lotta left school, I had made up my mind never to come between her and her own inclination in the matrimonial line; therefore, if she truly and honestly loves you, and if you truly and honestly love her, I am not the man to forbid the bans."

"My dear Mr. Sheldon, how shall I ever thank you for this!" cried Valentine, surprised into a belief in the purity of the stockbroker's intentions.

"Don't be in a hurry," replied that gentleman coolly; "you haven't heard me out yet. Though I may consent to take the very opposite line of conduct which I might be expected to take as a man of the world, I am not going to allow you and Charlotte to make fools of yourselves. There must be no love-in-a-cottage business, no marrying on nothing a-year, with the expectation that papa and mamma will make up the difference between that and a comfortable

income. In plain English, if I consent to receive you as Charlotte's future husband, you and she must consent to wait until you can to my entire satisfaction prove yourself in a position to keep a wife."

Valentine sighed doubtfully.

"I don't think either Miss Halliday or I are in an unreasonable hurry to begin life together," he said thoughtfully; "but there must be some fixed limit to our probation. I am afraid the waiting will be a very long business if I am to obtain a position that will satisfy you before I ask my dear girl to share my fate."

"Are your prospects so very black?"

"No; to my mind they seem wonderfully bright. But the earnings of a magazine-writer will scarcely come up to your idea of an independence. Just now I am getting about ten pounds a month. With industry I may stretch that ten to twenty; and with luck I might make the twenty into thirty—forty—fifty. A man has only to achieve something like a reputation in order to make a handsome living by his pen."

"I am very glad to hear that," said Mr. Sheldon; "and when you can fairly demonstrate to me that you are earning thirty pounds a month, you shall have my consent to your marriage with Charlotte, and I will do what I can to give you a fair start in life. I suppose you know that she hasn't a sixpence in the world that she can call her own?"

This was a trying question for Valentine Hawkehurst, and Mr. Sheldon looked at him with a sharp scrutinising glance as he awaited a reply. The young man flushed crimson, and grew pale again before he spoke.

"Yes," he said, "I have long been aware that Miss Halliday has no legal claim on her father's fortune."

"There you have hit the mark," cried Mr. Sheldon. "She has no claim to a sixpence in law; but to an honourable man that is not the question. Poor Halliday's money amounted in all to something like eighteen thousand pounds. That sum passed into my possession when I married my poor friend's widow, who had too much

respect for me to hamper my position as a man of business by any legal restraints that would have hindered my making the wisest use of her money. I have used that money, and I need scarcely tell you that I have employed it with considerable advantage to myself and Georgy. I therefore can afford to be generous, and I mean to be so; but the manner in which I do things must be of my own choosing. My own children are dead, and there is no one belonging to me that stands in Miss Halliday's way. When I die she will inherit a handsome fortune. And if she marries with my approval, I shall present her with a very comfortable dowry. I think you will allow that this is fair enough."

"Nothing could be fairer or more generous," replied Valentine with enthusiasm.

Mr. Sheldon's agreeable candour had entirely subjugated him. Despite of all that George had said to his brother's prejudice, he was ready to believe implicitly in Philip's fair dealing.

"And in return for this I ask something on your part," said Mr. Sheldon. "I want you to

give me your promise that you will take no serious step without my knowledge. You won't steal a march upon me. You won't walk off with Charlotte some fine morning and marry her at a registry-office, or anything of that kind, eh?"

"I will not," answered Valentine resolutely, with a very unpleasant recollection of his dealings with George Sheldon.

"Give me your hand upon that," cried the stockbroker.

Upon this the two men shook hands, and Valentine's fingers were almost crushed in the cold hard grip of Mr. Sheldon's muscular hand. And now there came upon Valentine's ear the sound of one of Mendelssohn's *Lieder ohne Worte*, tenderly played by the gentle hands he knew so well. And the lover began to feel that he could no longer sit roasting himself before the blazing fire, the heat whereof was multiplied to an insufferable degree by grate and fender of reflecting steel, and sipping the stockbroker's port with a hypocritical pretence of appreciation.

Mr. Sheldon was not slow to perceive his guest's impatience, and having made exactly the impression he wanted to make, was quite willing that the interview should come to an end.

"You had better be off to the drawing-room," he said good-naturedly; "I see you are in that stage of the fever in which masculine society is only a bore. You can go and hear Charlotte play, while I read the evening papers and write a few letters. You can let her know that you and I understand each other. Of course we shall see you very often. You'll eat your Christmas turkey with us, and so on; and I shall trust to your honour for the safe keeping of that promise you made me just now," said Mr. Sheldon.

"And I shall keep an uncommonly close watch upon you and the young lady, my friend," added that gentleman, communing with his own thoughts as he crossed the smart little hall, where two Birmingham iron knights in chain-armour bestrode their gallant chargers on two small tables of sham malachite.

Mr. Sheldon's library was not a very inspiring

apartment. His ideas of a *sanctum sanctorum* did not soar above the commonplace. A decent square room furnished with plenty of pigeon-holes, a neat brass scale for the weighing of letters, a copying-press, a waste-paper basket, a stout brass-mounted office inkstand capable of holding a quart or so of ink, and a Post-office Directory, were all he asked for his hours of leisure and meditation. In a handsome glazed bookcase opposite his writing-table appeared a richly-bound edition of the *Waverley Novels*, Knight's *Shakespeare*, Hume and Smollett, Fielding, Goldsmith, and Gibbon ; but except when Georgy dusted the sacred volumes with her own fair hands, the glass doors of the bookcase were never opened.

Mr. Sheldon turned on the gas, seated himself at his comfortable writing-table, and took up his pen. A quire of office note-paper with his City address upon it lay ready beneath his hand ; but he did not begin to write immediately. He sat for some time with his elbows on the table, and his chin in his hands, meditating with dark fixed brows.

"Can I trust her?" he asked himself. "Is it safe to have her near me—after—after what she said to me in Fitzgeorge-street? Yes, I think I can trust her, up to a certain point; but beyond that I must be on my guard. She might be more dangerous than a stranger. One thing is quite clear: she must be provided for somehow or other. The question is, whether she is to be provided for in this house or out of it; and whether I can make her serve me as I want to be served."

This was the gist of Mr. Sheldon's meditations; but they lasted for some time. The question which he had to settle was an important one, and he was too wise a man not to contemplate a subject from every possible point of sight before arriving at his decision. He took a letter-clip from one side of his table, and turned over several open letters in search of some particular document.

He came at last to the letter he wanted. It was written on very common note-paper, with brown-looking ink, and the penmanship was evidently that of an uneducated person; but Mr.

Sheldon studied its contents with the air of a man who is dealing with no unimportant missive.

This was the letter which so deeply interested the stockbroker.

"Honored Sir—This coms hopping that You and Your Honored ladie are well has it leevs me tho nott so strong has i coud wish wich his nott too bee expect at my time off life my pore neffew was tooke with the tyfus last tewsday weak was giv over on thirsday and we hav berried him at kensil grean Honored Mr Sheldon I hav now no home my pore neece must go hout into survis Luckly there har no Childring and the pore gurl can gett hur living as housmade wich she were in survis hat hi gate befor she marrid my pore Joseff Honored sir i ham trewly sorry too trubbel you butt i think for hold times you will forgiv the libertey off this letter i would nott hintrewd on you iff i had enny frend to help me in my old aig

"Your obeddient survent

"An woolper

"17 Litle Tottles-yarde lambeft"

"No friend to help her in her old age," muttered Mr. Sheldon: "that means that she intends to throw herself upon me for the rest of her life, and to put me to the expense of burying her when she is so obliging as to die. Very pleasant, upon my word! A man has a servant in the days of his poverty, pays her every fraction he owes her in the shape of wages, and wishes her good speed when she goes to settle down among her relations; and one fine morning, when he has got into a decent position, she writes to inform him that her nephew is dead, and that she expects him to provide for her forthwith. That is the gist of Mrs. Woolper's letter; and if it were not for one or two considerations, I should be very much inclined to take a business-like view of the case, and refer the lady to her parish. What are poor-rates intended for, I should like to know, if a man who pays four-and-twopence in the pound is to be pestered in this sort of way?"

And then Mr. Sheldon, having given vent to his vexation by such reflections as these, set himself to examine the matter in another light.

"I must manage to keep sweet with Nancy Woolper somehow or other, that's very clear; for a chattering old woman is a dangerous enemy for a man to have. I might provide for her decently enough out of doors for something like a pound a week; and that would be a cheap-enough way of paying off all old scores. But I'm not quite clear that it would be a safe way. A life of idleness might develop Mrs. Woolper's latent propensity for gossip—and gossip is what I want to avoid. No, that plan won't do."

For some moments Mr. Sheldon meditated silently, with his brows fixed even more sternly than before. Then he struck his hand suddenly on the morocco-covered table and uttered his thoughts aloud.

"I'll risk it," he said; "she shall come into the house and serve my interests by keeping a sharp watch upon Charlotte Halliday. There shall be no secret marriage between those two. No, my friend Valentine, you may be a very clever fellow, but you are not quite clever enough to steal a march upon me."

Having arrived at this conclusion, Mr. Sheldon wrote a few lines to Nancy Woolper, telling her to call upon him at the Lawn.

CHAPTER V.

MR. SHELDON IS BENEVOLENT.

Nancy Woolper had lost little of her activity during the ten years that had gone by since she received her wages from Mr. Sheldon on his breaking up his establishment in Fitzgeorge-street. Her master had given her the opportunity of remaining in his service, had she so pleased; but Mrs. Woolper was a person of independent, not to say haughty, spirit, and she had preferred to join her small fortunes with those of a nephew who was about to begin business as a chandler and general dealer in a very small way, rather than to submit herself to the sway of that lady whom she insisted on calling Miss Georgy.

"It's so long since I've been used to a missus," she said, when announcing her decision

to Mr. Sheldon, "I doubt if I could do with Miss Georgy's finnickin ways. I should feel tewed like, if she came into the kitchen, worrittin' and asking questions. I've been used to my own ways, and I don't suppose I could do with hers."

So Nancy departed, to enter on a career of unpaid drudgery in the household of her kinsman, and to lose the last shilling of her small savings in the futile endeavour to sustain the fortunes of the general dealer. His death, following very speedily upon his insolvency, left the poor soul quite adrift; and in this extremity she had been fain to make her appeal to Mr. Sheldon. His reply came in due course, but not without upwards of a week's delay; during which time Nancy Woolper's spirits sank very low, while a dreary vision of a living grave called a workhouse loomed more and more darkly upon her poor old eyes. She had well-nigh given up all hope of succour from her old master when the letter came, and she was the more inclined to be grateful for very small help after this interval

of suspense. It was not without strong emotion that Mrs. Woolper obeyed her old master's summons. She had nursed the hard, cold man of the world whom she was going to see once more after ten years of severance; and though it was more difficult for her to imagine that Philip Sheldon the stockbroker was the same Philip she had carried in her stout arms and hushed upon her breast forty years ago, than it would have been to fancy the dead who had lived in those days restored to life and walking by her side, still she could not forget that such things had been, and could not refrain from looking at her master with more loving eyes because of that memory.

A strange dark cloud had arisen between her and her master's image during the latter part of her service in Fitzgeorge-street: but little by little the cloud had melted away, leaving the familiar image clear and unshadowed as of old. She had suffered her mind to be filled by a suspicion so monstrous that for a time it held her as by some fatal spell; but with reflection

came the assurance that this thing could not be. Day by day she saw the man whom she had suspected, going about the common business of his life, coldly serene of aspect, untroubled of manner, confronting fortune with his head erect, living quietly in the house where he had been wont to live, haunted by no dismal shadows, subject to no dark hours of remorse, no sudden access of despair, always equable, business-like, and untroubled: and she told herself that such a man could not be guilty of the unutterable horror she had imagined.

For a year things had gone on thus, and then came the marriage with Mrs. Halliday. Mr. Sheldon went down to Barlingford for the performance of that interesting ceremony; and Nancy Woolper bade farewell to the house in Fitzgeorge-street, and handed the key to the agent, who was to deliver it in due course to Mr. Sheldon's successor.

To-day, after a lapse of more than ten years, Mrs. Woolper sat in the stockbroker's study,

facing the scrutinising gaze of those bright black eyes, which had been familiar to her of old, and which had lost none of their cold glitter in the wear and tear of life.

"Then you think you can be of some use in the house, as a kind of overlooker of the other servants, eh, Nancy, — to prevent waste and gadding out of doors, and so on?" said Mr. Sheldon interrogatively.

"Ay, sure, that I can, Mr. Philip," answered the old woman promptly; "and if I don't save you more money than I cost you, the sooner you turn me out o' doors the better. I know what London servants are, and I know their ways; and if Miss Georgy doesn't take to the housekeeping, I know as how things must be hugger-mugger-like below stairs, however smart and tidy things may be above."

"Mrs. Sheldon knows about as much of housekeeping as a baby," replied Philip with supreme contempt. "She'll not interfere with you; and if you serve me faithfully—"

"That I allers did, Mr. Philip."

"Yes, yes; I daresay you did. But I want faithful service in the future as well as in the past. Of course you know that I have a step-daughter?"

"Tom Halliday's little girl, as went to school at Scarborough."

"The same. But poor Tom's little girl is now a fine young woman, and a source of considerable anxiety to me. I am bound to say she is an excellent girl—amiable, obedient, and all that kind of thing; but she *is* a girl, and I freely confess that I am not learned in the ways of girls; and I'm very much inclined to be afraid of them."

"As how, sir?"

"Well, you see, Nancy, they come home from school with their silly heads full of romantic stuff, fit for nothing but to read novels and strum upon the piano; and before you know where you are, they fall over head and ears in love with the first decent-looking young man who pays them a compliment. At least, that's my experience."

"Meaning Miss Halliday, sir?" asked Nancy

simply. "Has she fallen in love with some young chap?"

"She has, and with a young chap who is not yet in a position to support a wife. Now, if this girl were my own child, I should decidedly set my face against this marriage; but as she is only my stepdaughter, I wash my hands of all responsibility in the matter. 'Marry the man you have chosen, my dear,' say I; 'all I ask is, that you don't marry him until he can give you a comfortable home.' 'Very well, papa,' says my young lady in her most dutiful manner, and 'Very well, sir,' says my young gentleman; and they both declare themselves agreeable to any amount of delay, provided the marriage comes off some time between this and doomsday."

"Well, sir?" asked Nancy, rather at a loss to understand why Philip Sheldon, the closest and most reserved of men, should happen to be so confidential to-day.

"Well, Nancy, what I want to prevent is any underhand work. I know what very limited notions of honour young men are apt to entertain

nowadays, and how intensely foolish a boarding-school miss can be on occasion. I don't want these young people to run off to Gretna Green some fine morning, or to steal a march upon me by getting married on the sly at some out-of-the-way church, after having invested their united fortunes in the purchase of a special license. In plain words, I distrust Miss Halliday's lover, and I distrust Miss Halliday's common sense; and I want to have a sensible, sharp-eyed person in the house always on the look-out for any kind of danger, and able to protect my stepdaughter's interests as well as my own."

"But the young lady's mamma, sir—she would look after her daughter, I suppose?"

"Her mamma is foolishly indulgent, and about as capable of taking care of her daughter as of sitting in Parliament. You remember pretty Georgy Cradock, and you must know what she was—and what she is. Mrs. Sheldon is the same woman as Georgy Cradock—a little older, and a little more plump and rosy; but just as pretty, and just as useless."

The interview was prolonged for some little time after this, and it ended in a thorough understanding between Mr. Sheldon and his old servant. Nancy Woolper was to reënter that gentleman's service, and over and above all ordinary duties, she was to undertake the duty of keeping a close watch upon all the movements of Charlotte Halliday. In plain words, she was to be a spy, a private detective, so far as this young lady was concerned; but Mr. Sheldon was too wise to put his requirements into plain words, knowing that even in the hour of her extremity Nancy Woolper would have refused to fill such an office had she clearly understood the measure of its infamy.

Upon the day that followed his interview with Mrs. Woolper, the stockbroker came home from the City an hour or two earlier than his custom, and startled Miss Halliday by appearing in the garden where she was walking alone, looking her brightest and prettiest in her dark winter hat and jacket, and pacing briskly to and fro among the bare frost-bound patches of earth that had once been flower-beds.

"I want a few minutes' quiet talk with you, Lotta," said Mr. Sheldon. "You'd better come into my study, where we're pretty sure not to be interrupted."

The girl blushed crimson as she acceded to this request, being assured that Mr. Sheldon was going to discuss her matrimonial engagement. Valentine had told her of that very satisfactory interview in the dining-room, and from that time she had been trying to find an opportunity for the acknowledgment of her stepfather's generosity. As yet the occasion had not arisen. She did not know how to frame her thanksgiving, and she shrank shyly from telling Mr. Sheldon how grateful she was to him for the liberality of mind which had distinguished his conduct in this affair.

"I really ought to thank him," she said to herself more than once. "I was quite prepared for his doing his uttermost to prevent my marriage with Valentine; and instead of that, he volunteers his consent, and even promises to give us a fortune. I am bound to thank him for such generous kindness."

Perhaps there is no task more difficult than to offer grateful tribute to a person whom one has been apt to think of with a feeling very near akin to dislike. Ever since her mother's second marriage Charlotte had striven against an instinctive distaste for Mr. Sheldon's society, and an innate distrust of Mr. Sheldon's affectionate regard for herself; but now that he had proved his sincerity in this most important crisis of her life, she awoke all at once to the sense of the wrong she had done.

"I am always reading the Sermon on the Mount, and yet in my thoughts about Mr. Sheldon I have never been able to remember those words, 'Judge not, that ye be not judged.' His kindness touches me to the very heart, and I feel it all the more keenly because of my injustice."

She followed her stepfather into the prim little study. There was no fire, and the room was colder than a vault on this bleak December day. Charlotte shivered, and drew her jacket more tightly across her chest as she perched herself on one of Mr. Sheldon's shining red morocco chairs.

"The room strikes cold," she said; "very, very cold."

After this there was a brief pause, during which Mr. Sheldon took some papers from the pocket of his overcoat, and arranged them on his desk with an absent manner, as if he were rather deliberating upon what he was going to say than thinking of what he was doing. While he loitered thus Charlotte found courage to speak.

"I wish to thank you, Mr. Sheldon—papa," she said, pronouncing the "papa" with some slight appearance of effort, in spite of her desire to be grateful: "I—I have been wishing to thank you for the last day or two; only it seems so difficult sometimes to express oneself about these things."

"I do not deserve or wish for your thanks, my dear. I have only done my duty."

"But, indeed, you do deserve my thanks, and you have them in all sincerity, papa. You have been very, very good to me—about—about Valentine. I thought you would be sure to oppose our marriage on the ground of imprudence, you know, and—"

"I do oppose your marriage in the present on the ground of imprudence, and I am only consentient to it in the future on the condition that Mr. Hawkehurst shall have secured a comfortable income by his literary labours. He seems to be clever, and he promises fairly—"

"O yes indeed, dear papa," cried the girl, pleased by this meed of praise for her lover; "he is more than clever. I am sure you would say so if you had time to read his article on Madame de Sévigné in the *Cheapside*."

"I daresay it's very good, my dear; but I don't care for Madame de Sévigné—"

"Or his sketch of Bossuet's career in the *Charing Cross*."

"My dear child, I do not even know who Bossuet was. All I require from Mr. Hawkehurst is, that he shall earn a good income before he takes you away from this house. You have been accustomed to a certain style of living, and I cannot allow you to encounter a life of poverty."

"But, dear papa, I am not in the least afraid of poverty."

"I daresay not, my dear. You have never been poor," replied Mr. Sheldon coolly. "I don't suppose I am as much afraid of a rattle-snake as the poor wretches who are accustomed to see one swinging by his tail from the branch of a tree any day in the course of their travels. I have only a vague idea that a cobra de capello is an unpleasant customer: but depend upon it, those foreign fellows feel their blood stagnate and turn to ice at sight of the cold slimy-looking monster. Poverty and I travelled the same road once, and I know what the gentleman is. I don't want to meet him again."

Mr. Sheldon lapsed into silence after this. His last words had been spoken to himself rather than to Charlotte, and the thoughts that accompanied them seemed far from pleasant to him.

Charlotte sat opposite her stepfather, patiently awaiting his pleasure. She looked at the gaudily-bound books behind the glass doors, and wondered whether anyone had ever opened any of the volumes.

"I should like to read dear Sir Walter's stories once more," she thought; "there never,

never was so sweet a romance as the *Bride of Lammermoor*, and I cannot imagine that one could ever grow weary of reading it. But to ask Mr. Sheldon for the key of that bookcase would be quite impossible. I think his books must be copies of special editions, not meant to be read. I wonder whether they are real books, or only upholsterer's dummies?"

And then her fancies went vagabondising off to that little archetype of a cottage on the heights of Wimbledon-common, in which she and Valentine were to live when they were married. She was always furnishing and refurnishing this cottage, building it up and pulling it down, as the caprice of the moment dictated. Now it had bow windows and white stuccoed walls—now it was Elizabethan—now the simplest, quaintest, rose-embowered cottager's dwelling, with diamond-paned casements, and deep thatch upon the old gray roof. This afternoon she amused herself by collecting a small library for Valentine, while waiting Mr. Sheldon's next observation. He was to have all her favourite books, of course; and

they were to be bound in the prettiest, most girlish bindings. She could see the dainty volumes, primly ranged on the little carved oak bookcase, which Valentine was to "pick up" in Wardour-street. She fancied herself walking down that mart of bric-a-brac arm-in-arm with her lover, intent on "picking up." Ah, what happiness! what dear delight in the thought! And O, of all the bright dreams we dream, how few are realised upon this earth! Do they find their fulfilment in heaven, those visions of perfect bliss?

Mr. Sheldon looked up from his desk at last. Miss Halliday remarked to herself that his face was pale and haggard in the chill wintry sunlight; but she knew how hard and self-denying a life he led in his stern devotion to business, and she was in no manner surprised to see him looking ill.

"I want to say a few words to you on a matter of business, Lotta," he began, "and I must ask you to give me all your attention."

"I will do so with pleasure, papa, but I am awfully stupid about business."

"I shall do my best to make matters simple. I suppose you know what money your father left, including the sums his life had been insured for?"

"Yes, I have heard mamma say it was eighteen thousand pounds. I do so hate the idea of those insurances. It seems like the price of a man's life, doesn't it? I daresay that is a very unbusiness-like way of considering the question, but I cannot bear to think that we got money by dear papa's death."

These remarks were too trivial for Mr. Sheldon's notice. He went on with what he had to say in the cold hard voice that was familiar to his clerks and to the buyers and sellers of shares and stock who had dealings with him.

"Your father left eighteen thousand pounds; that amount was left to your mother, without reservation. When she married me, without any settlement, that money became mine, in point of law—mine to squander or make away with as I pleased. You know that I have made good use of that money, and that your mother has had no reason to repent her confidence in my honour

and honesty. The time has now come in which that honour will be put to a sharper test. You have no legal claim on so much as a shilling of your father's fortune."

"I know that, Mr. Sheldon," cried Charlotte eagerly, "and Valentine knows also; and, believe me, I do not expect—"

"I have to settle matters with my own conscience as well as with your expectations, my dear Lotta," Mr. Sheldon said solemnly. "Your father left you unprovided for; but as a man of honour I feel myself bound to take care that you shall not suffer by his want of caution. I have therefore prepared a deed of gift, by which I transfer to you five thousand pounds, now invested in Unitas Bank shares."

"You are going to give me five thousand pounds!" cried Charlotte, astounded.

"Without reservation."

"You mean to say that you will give me this fortune when I marry, papa?" said Charlotte interrogatively.

"I shall give it to you immediately," replied

Mr. Sheldon. "I wish you to be thoroughly independent of me and my pleasure. You will then understand that if I insist upon the prudence of delay, I do so in your interest and not in my own. I wish you to feel that if I am a hindrance to your immediate marriage, it is not because I wish to delay the disbursement of your dowry."

"O, Mr. Sheldon, O, papa, you are more than generous—you are noble! It is not that I care for the money. O, believe me, there is no one in the world who could care less for that than I do. But your thoughtful kindness, your generosity, touches me to the very heart. O, please let me kiss you, just as if you were my own dear father come back to life to protect and guide me. I have thought you cold and worldly. I have done you so much wrong."

She ran to him, and wound her arms about his neck before he could put her off, and lifted up her pretty rosy mouth to his dry hot lips. Her heart was overflowing with generous emotion, her face beamed with a happy smile. She was so pleased to find her mother's husband better

than she had thought him. But, to her supreme astonishment, he thrust her from him roughly, almost violently; and looking up at his face she saw it darkened by a blacker shadow than she had ever seen upon it before. Anger, terror, pain, remorse, she knew not what, but an expression so horrible that she shrunk from him with a sense of alarm, and went back to her chair, bewildered and trembling.

"You frightened me, Mr. Sheldon," she said faintly.

"Not more than you frightened me," answered the stockbroker, walking to the window and taking his stand there, with his face hidden from Charlotte. "I did not know there was so much feeling in me. For God's sake, let us have no sentiment."

"Were you angry with me just now?" asked the girl falteringly, utterly at a loss to comprehend the change in her stepfather's manner.

"No, I was not angry. I am not accustomed to these strong emotions," replied Mr. Sheldon huskily; "I cannot stand them. Pray let us

avoid all sentimental discussion. I am anxious to do my duty in a straightforward, business-like way. I don't want gratitude—or fuss. The five thousand pounds are yours, and I am pleased to find you consider the amount sufficient. And now I have only one small favour to ask of you in return."

"I should be very ungrateful if I refused to do anything you may ask," said Charlotte, who could not help feeling a little chilled and disappointed by Mr. Sheldon's stony rejection of her gratitude.

"The matter is very simple. You are young, and have, in the usual course of things, a long life before you. But—you know there is always a 'but' in these cases—a railway accident—a little carelessness in passing your drawing-room fire some evening when you are dressed in flimsy gauze or muslin—a fever—a cold—any one of the many dangers that lie in wait for all of us, and our best calculations are falsified. If you were to marry and die childless, that money would go to your husband, and neither your

mother nor I would ever touch a sixpence of it. Now as the money, practically, belongs to your mother, I consider that this contingency should be provided against—in her interests as well as in mine. In plain words, I want you to make a will, leaving that money to me."

"I am quite ready to do so," replied Charlotte.

"Very good, my dear. I felt assured that you would take a sensible view of the matter. If you marry your dear Mr. Hawkehurst, have a family by and by, we will throw the old will into the fire and make a new one; but in the mean time it's just as well to be on the safe side. You shall go into the City with me to-morrow morning, and shall execute the will at my office. It will be the simplest document possible—as simple as the will made by old Serjeant Crane, in which he disposed of half a million of money in half-a-dozen lines—at the rate of five thousand pounds per word. After we've settled that little matter, we can arrange the transfer of the shares. The whole affair won't occupy an hour."

"I will do whatever you wish," said Charlotte meekly.

She was not at all elated by the idea of coming suddenly into possession of five thousand pounds; but she was very much impressed by the new view of Mr. Sheldon's character afforded her by his conduct of to-day. And then her thoughts, constant to one point as the needle to the pole, reverted to her lover, and she began to think of the effect her fortune might have upon his prospects. He might go the bar, he might work and study in pleasant Temple chambers, with wide airy windows overlooking the river, and read law-books in the evening at the Wimbledon cottage for a few delightful years, at the end of which he would of course become Lord Chancellor. That he should devote such intellect and consecrate such genius as his to the service of his country's law-courts, and *not* ultimately seat himself on the Woolsack, was a contingency not to be imagined by Miss Halliday. Ah, what would not five thousand pounds buy for him! The cottage expanded into a mansion, the little

case of books developed into a library second only to that of the Duc d'Aumale, a noble steed waited at the glass door of the vestibule to convey Mr. Hawkehurst to the Temple, before the minute-hand of Mr. Sheldon's stern skeleton clock had passed from one figure to another: so great an adept was this young lady in the art of castle-building.

"Am I to tell mamma about this conversation?" asked Charlotte presently.

"Well, no, I think not," replied Mr. Sheldon thoughtfully. "These family arrangements cannot be kept too quiet. Your mamma is a talking person, you know, Charlotte; and as we don't want everyone in this part of Bayswater to know the precise amount of your fortune, we may as well let matters rest as they are. Of course you would not wish Mr. Hawkehurst to be enlightened?"

"Why not, papa?"

"For several reasons. First and foremost, it must be pleasant to you to be sure that he is thoroughly disinterested. I have told him that

you will something as a gift from me; but he may have implied that the something would be little more than a couple of hundreds to furnish a house. Secondly, it must be remembered, that he has been brought up in a bad school, and the best way to make him self-reliant and industrious is to let him think he has nothing but his own industry to depend upon. I have set him a task. When he has accomplished that, he shall have you and your five thousand pounds to boot. Till then I should strongly advise you to keep this business a secret."

"Yes," answered Charlotte meditatively; "I think you are right. It would have been very nice to tell him of your kindness; but I want to be quite sure that he loves me for myself alone—from first to last—without one thought of money."

"That is wise," said Mr. Sheldon decisively; and thus ended the interview.

Charlotte accompanied her stepfather to the City early next morning, and filled-in the blanks in a lithographed form, prepared for the con-

venience of such testators as, being about to dispose of their property, do not care to employ the services of a legal adviser.

The will seemed to Charlotte the simplest possible affair. She bequeathed all her property, real and personal, to Philip Sheldon, without reserve. But as her entire fortune consisted of the five thousand pounds just given her by that gentleman, and as her personal property was comprised in a few pretty dresses and trinkets, and desks and workboxes, she could not very well object to such an arrangement.

"Of course, mamma would have all my books and caskets, and boxes and things," she said thoughtfully: "and I should like Diana Paget to have some of my jewelry, please, Mr. Sheldon. Mamma has plenty, you know."

"There is no occasion to talk of that, Charlotte," replied the stockbroker. "This will is only a matter of form."

Mr. Sheldon omitted to inform his stepdaughter that the instrument just executed would, upon her wedding-day, become so much waste-

paper; an omission that was not in harmony with the practical and careful habits of that gentleman.

"Yes, I know that it is only a form," replied Charlotte; "but, after making a will, one feels as if one was going to die. At least I do. It seems a kind of preparation for death. I don't wonder people rather dislike doing it."

"It is only foolish people who dislike doing it," said Mr. Sheldon, who was in his most practical mood to-day. "And now we will go and arrange a more agreeable business—the transfer of the shares."

After this there was a little commercial juggling, in the form of signing and countersigning, which was quite beyond Charlotte's comprehension: which operation being completed, she was told that she was owner of five thousand pounds in Unitas Bank shares, and that the dividends accruing from time to time on those shares would be hers to dispose of as she pleased.

"The income arising from your capital will be more than you can spend so long as you remain under my roof," said Mr. Sheldon. "I should

therefore strongly recommend you to invest your dividends as they arise, and thus increase your capital."

"You are so kind and thoughtful," murmured Charlotte: "I shall always be pleased to take your advice."

She was strongly impressed by the kindness of the man her thoughts had wronged.

"How difficult it is to understand these reserved, matter-of-fact people!" she said to herself. "Because my stepfather does not talk sentiment, I have fancied him hard and worldly; and yet he has proved himself as capable of doing a noble action as if he were the most poetical of mankind."

Mrs. Sheldon had been told that Charlotte was going into the City to choose a new watch, wherewith to replace the ill-used little Geneva toy that had been her delight as a school-girl; and as Charlotte brought home a neat little English-made chronometer from a renowned emporium on Ludgate-hill, the simple matron accepted this explanation in all good faith.

"I'm sure, Lotta, you must confess your step-

father is kindness itself in most matters," said Georgy, after an admiring examination of the new watch. "When I think how kindly he has taken this business about Mr. Hawkehurst, and how disinterested he has proved himself in his ideas about your marriage, I really am inclined to think him the best of men."

Georgy said this with an air of triumph. She could not forget that there were people in Barlingford who had said hard things about Philip Sheldon, and had prophesied unutterable miseries for herself and her daughter as the bitter consequence of the imprudence she had been guilty of in her second marriage.

"He has indeed been very good, mamma," Charlotte replied gravely, "and, believe me, I am truly grateful. He does not like fuss or sentiment; but I hope he knows that I appreciate his kindness."

CHAPTER VI.

RIDING THE HIGH HORSE.

Never, in his brightest dreams, had Valentine Hawkehurst imagined the stream of life so fair and sunny a river as it seemed to him now. Fortune had treated him so scurvily for seven-and-twenty years of his life, only to relent of a sudden and fling all her choicest gifts into his lap.

"I must be the prince in the fairy tale who begins life as a revolting animal of the rhinoceros family, and ends by marrying the prettiest princess in Elfindom," he said to himself gaily, as he paced the broad walks of Kensington-gardens, where the bare trees swung their big black branches in the wintry blast, and the rooks cawed their loudest at close of the brief day.

What, indeed, could this young adventurer demand from benignant Fortune above and beyond

the blessings she had given him? The favoured suitor of the fairest and brightest woman he had ever looked upon, received by her kindred, admitted to her presence, and only bidden to serve a due apprenticeship before he claimed her as his own for ever. What more could he wish? what further boon could he implore from the Fates?

Yes, there was one thing more—one thing for which Mr. Hawkehurst pined, while most thankful for his many blessings. He wanted a decent excuse for separating himself most completely from Horatio Paget. He wanted to shake himself free from all the associations of his previous existence. He wanted to pass through the waters of Jordan, and to emerge purified, regenerate, leaving his garments on the furthermost side of the river; and, with all other things appertaining to the past, he would fain have rid himself of Captain Paget.

"'Be sure your sin will find you out,'" mused the young man; "and having found you, be sure that it will stick to you like a leech, if your sin takes the shape of an unprincipled acquaintance,

as it does in my case. I may try my hardest to cut the past, but will Horatio Paget let me alone in the future? I doubt it. The bent of that man's genius shows itself in his faculty for living upon other people. He knows that I am beginning to earn money regularly, and has begun to borrow of me already. When I can earn more, he will want to borrow more; and although it is very sweet to work for Charlotte Halliday, it would not be by any means agreeable to slave for my friend Paget. Shall I offer him a pound a week, and ask him to retire into the depths of Wales or Cornwall, amend his ways, and live the life of a repentant hermit? I think I could bring myself to sacrifice the weekly sovereign, if there were any hope that Horatio Paget could cease to be—Horatio Paget, on this side the grave. No, I have the misfortune to be intimately acquainted with the gentleman. When he is in the swim, as he calls it, and is earning money on his own account, he will give himself cosy little dinners and four-and-sixpenny primrose gloves; and when he is down on his luck, he will come whining to me."

This was by no means a pleasant idea to Mr. Hawkehurst. In the old days he had been distinguished by all the Bohemian's recklessness, and even more than the Bohemian's generosity in his dealings with friend or companion. But now all was changed. He was no longer reckless. A certain result was demanded from him as the price of Charlotte Halliday's hand, and he set himself to accomplish his allotted task with all due forethought and earnestness of purpose. He had need even to exercise restraint over himself, lest in his eagerness he should do too much, and so lay himself prostrate from the ill effects of overwork; so anxious was he to push on upon the road whose goal was so fair a temple, so light seemed that labour of love which was performed for the sake of Charlotte.

He communed with himself very often on the subject of that troublesome question about Captain Paget. How was he to sever his frail skiff from that rakish privateer? What excuse could he find for renouncing his share in the Omega-street lodgings, and setting up a new home elsewhere?

"Policy might prompt me to keep my worthy friend under my eye," he said to himself, "in order that I may be sure there is no underhand work going on between him and Philip Sheldon. But I can scarcely believe that Philip Sheldon has any inkling about the Haygarthian fortune. If he had, he would surely not receive me as Charlotte's suitor. What possible motive could he have for doing so?"

This was a question which Mr. Hawkehurst had frequently put to himself; for his confidence in Mr. Sheldon was not of that kind which asks no questions. Even while most anxious to believe in that gentleman's honesty of purpose, he was troubled by occasional twinges of unbelief.

During the period which had elapsed since his return from Yorkshire, he had been able to discover nothing of any sinister import from the proceedings of Captain Paget. That gentleman appeared to be still engaged upon the promoting business, although by no means so profitably as heretofore. He went into the City every day, and came home in the evening toilworn and out

of spirits. He talked freely of his occupation—how he had done much, or done nothing, during the day; and Valentine was at a loss to perceive any further ground for the suspicion that had arisen in his mind after the meeting at the Ullerton station, and the shuffling of the sanctimonious Goodge with regard to Mrs. Rebecca Haygarth's letters.

Mr. Hawkehurst therefore determined upon boldly cutting the knot that tied him to the familiar companion of his wanderings.

"I am tired of watching and suspecting," he said to himself. "If my dear love has a right to this fortune, it will surely come to her; or if it should never come, we can live very happily without it. Indeed, for my own part, I am inclined to believe that I should be prouder and happier as the husband of a dowerless wife, than as prince-consort to the heiress of the Haygarths. We have built up such a dear, cheery, unpretentious home for ourselves in our talk of the future, that I doubt if we should care to change it for the stateliest mansion in Kensington Palace-gardens or Belgrave-

square. My darling could not be my housekeeper, and make lemon-cheesecakes in her own pretty little kitchen, if we lived in Belgrave-square; and how could she stand at one of those great Birmingham ironwork gates in the Palace-gardens to watch me ride away to my work?"

To a man as deeply in love as Mr. Hawkehurst, the sordid dross which other people prize so highly is apt to become daily more indifferent; a kind of colour-blindness comes over the vision of the true lover, and the glittering yellow ore seems only so much dull vulgar earth, too mean a thing to be regarded by any but the mean of soul. Thus it was that Mr. Hawkehurst relaxed his suspicion of Captain Paget, and neglected his patron and ally of Gray's Inn, much to the annoyance of that gentleman, who tormented the young man with little notes demanding interviews.

These interviews had of late been far from agreeable to either of the allies. George Sheldon urged the necessity of an immediate marriage; Valentine declined to act in an underhand man-

ner, after the stockbroker's unexpected generosity.

"Generosity!" echoed George Sheldon, when Valentine had given him this point-blank refusal at the close of a stormy argument. "Generosity! My brother Phil's generosity! Egad, that is about the best thing I've heard for the last ten years. If I pleased, Mr. Valentine Hawkehurst, I could tell you something about my brother which would enable you to estimate his generosity at its true value. But I don't please; and if you choose to run counter to me and my interests, you must pay the price of your folly. You may think yourself uncommonly lucky if the price isn't a stiff one."

"I am prepared to abide by my decision," answered Valentine. "Miss Halliday without a shilling is so dear to me, that I don't care to commit a dishonourable action in order to secure my share of the fortune she may claim. I turned over a new leaf on the day when I first knew myself possessed of her affection. I don't want to go back to the old leaves."

George Sheldon gave himself an impatient

shrug. "I have heard of a great many fools," he said: "but I never heard of a fool who would play fast-and-loose with a hundred thousand pounds, and until to-day I couldn't have believed there was such an animal."

Mr. Hawkehurst did not deign to notice this remark.

"Do be reasonable, Sheldon," he said. "You ask me to do what my sense of right will not permit me to do, and you ask me that which I fully believe to be impossible. I cannot for a moment imagine that any persuasion of mine would induce Charlotte to consent to a secret marriage, after your brother's fair and liberal conduct."

"Of course not," cried George with savage impatience; "that's my brother Phil all over. He is so honourable, so plain and straightforward in all his dealings, that he would get the best of Lucifer himself in a bargain. I tell you, Hawkehurst, you don't know how deep he is—as deep as the bottomless pit, by Jove! His very generosity makes me all the more afraid

of him. I don't understand his game. If he consented to your marriage in order to get rid of Charlotte, he would let you marry her off-hand; but instead of doing that, he makes conditions which must delay your marriage for years. There is the point that bothers me."

"You had better pursue your own course, without reference to me or my marriage with Miss Halliday," said Valentine.

"That is exactly what I must do. I can't leave the Haygarth estate to the mercy of Tom, Dick, and Harry, while you try to earn thirty pounds a month by scribbling for the magazines. I must make my bargain with Philip instead of with you, and I can tell you that you'll be the loser by the transaction."

"I don't quite see that."

"Perhaps not. You see, you don't quite understand my brother Phil. If this money gets into his hands, be sure some of it will stick to them."

"Why should the money get into his hands?"

"Because so long as Charlotte Halliday is

under his roof, she is, to a certain extent, under his authority. And then, I tell you again, there is no calculating the depth of that man. He has thrown dust in your eyes already. He will make that poor girl believe him the most disinterested of mankind."

"You can warn her."

"Yes; as I have warned you. To what purpose? You are inclined to believe in Phil rather than to believe in me, and you will be so inclined to the end of the chapter. You remember that man Palmer, at Rugely, who used to go to church and take the sacrament?"

"Yes; of course I remember that case. What of him?"

"Why, people believed in him, you know, and thought him a jolly good fellow, up to the time when they discovered that he had poisoned a few of his friends in a quiet gentlemanly way."

Mr. Hawkehurst smiled at the irrelevance of this remark. He could not perceive the connection of ideas between Palmer the Rugely poisoner, and Philip Sheldon the stockbroker.

"That was an extreme case," he said.

"Yes; of course that was an extreme case," answered George carelessly. "Only it goes far to prove that a man may be gifted with a remarkable genius for throwing dust in the eyes of his fellow-creatures."

There was no further disputation between the lawyer and Valentine. George Sheldon began to understand that a secret marriage was not to be accomplished in the present position of affairs.

"I am half inclined to suspect that Phil knows something about that money," he said presently, "and is playing some artful game of his own."

"In that case your better policy would be to take the initiative," answered Valentine.

"I have no other course."

"And will Charlotte know—will she know that I have been concerned in this business?" asked Valentine, growing very pale all of a sudden. He was thinking how mean he must appear in Miss Halliday's eyes, if she came to

understand that he had known her to be John Haygarth's heiress at the time he won from her the sweet confession of her love. "Will she ever believe how pure and true my love has been, if she comes to know this?" he asked himself despairingly, while George Sheldon deliberated in silence for a few moments.

"She need know nothing until the business comes to a head," replied George at last. "You see, there may be no resistance on the part of the Crown lawyers; and, in that case, Miss Halliday will get her rights after a moderate amount of delay. But if they choose to dispute her claim, it will be quite another thing—Halliday *versus* the Queen, and so on—with no end of swell Q.C.'s against us. In the latter case you'll have to put all your adventures at Ullerton and Huxter's Cross into an affidavit, and Miss H. must know everything."

"Yes; and then she will think—ah, no; I do not believe she can misunderstand me, come what may."

"All doubt and difficulty might be avoided

if you would manage a marriage on the quiet off-hand," said George.

"I tell you again that I cannot do that; and that, even if it were possible, I would not attempt it."

"So be it. You elect to ride the high horse; take care that magnificent animal doesn't give you an ugly tumble."

"I can take my chance."

"And I must take my chance with that brother of mine. The winning cards are all in my own hand this time, and it will be uncommonly hard if he gets the best of me."

On this the two gentlemen parted. Valentine went to look at a bachelor's lodging in the neighbourhood of the Edgware-road, which he had seen advertised in that morning's *Times;* and George Sheldon started for Bayswater, where he was always sure of a dinner and a liberal allowance of good wine from the hospitality of his prosperous kinsman.

CHAPTER VII.

MR. SHELDON IS PRUDENT.

VALENTINE found the apartments near the Edgware-road in every manner eligible. The situation was midway between his reading-room in Great Russell-street and the abode of his delight—a half-way house on the road between business and pleasure. The terms were very moderate, the rooms airy and pleasant; so he engaged them forthwith, his tenancy to commence at the end of the following week; and having settled this matter, he went back to Omega-street, bent on dissolving partnership with the Captain in a civil but decided manner.

A surprise, and a very agreeable one, awaited him at Chelsea. He found the sitting-room strewn with Captain Paget's personal property, and the Captain on his knees before a portmanteau, packing.

"You're just in time to give me a hand, Val," he said in his most agreeable manner. "I begin to find out my age when I put my poor old bones into abnormal attitudes. I daresay packing a trunk or two will be only child's-play to you."

"I'll pack half-a-dozen trunks if you like," replied Valentine. "But what is the meaning of this sudden move? I did not know you were going to leave town."

"Neither did I when you and I breakfasted together. I got an unexpected offer of a very decent position abroad this morning; a kind of agency, that will be much better than the hand-to-mouth business I've been doing lately."

"What kind of agency, and where?"

"Well, so far as I can make out at present, it is something in the steam navigation way. My head-quarters will be at Rouen."

"Rouen! Well, it's a pleasant lively old city enough, and as mediæval as one of Sir Walter's novels, provided they haven't Haussmanised it by this time. I am very glad to hear you have secured a comfortable berth."

"And I am not sorry to leave England, Val," answered the Captain in rather a mournful tone.

"Why not?"

"Because I think it's time you and I parted company. Our association begins to be rather disadvantageous to you, Val. We've had our ups and downs together, and we've got on very pleasantly, take it for all in all. But now that you're settling down as a literary man, engaged to that young woman, hand-in-glove with Philip Sheldon, and so on, I think it's time for me to take myself off. I'm not wanted; and sooner or later I should begin to feel myself in the way."

The Captain grew quite pathetic as he said this; and little pangs of remorse shot through Valentine's heart as he remembered how eager he had been to rid himself of this Old Man of the Mountain. And here was the poor old creature offering to take himself out of the way of his own accord.

Influenced by this touch of remorse, Mr. Hawkehurst held out his hand, and grasped that of his comrade and patron.

"I hope you may do well, in some—comfortable kind of business," he said heartily. That adjective 'comfortable' was a hasty substitute for the adjective 'honest,' which had been almost on his lips as he uttered his friendly wish. He was too well-disposed to all the world not to feel profound pity for this white-headed old man, who for so many years had eaten the bread of rogues and scoundrels.

"Come," he cried cheerily, "I'll take all the packing off your hands, Captain; and we'll eat our last dinner and drink our last bottle of sparkling together at my expense, at any place you please to name."

"Say Blanchard's," replied Horatio Paget. "I like a corner-window, looking out upon the glare and bustle of Regent-street. It reminds one just a little of the Maison Dorée and the boulevard. We'll drink Charlotte Halliday's health, Val, in bumpers. She's a charming young person, and I only wish she were an heiress, for your sake."

The eyes of the two men met as the Captain said this; and there was a twinkle in the cold

gray orbs of that gentleman which had a very unpleasant effect upon Valentine.

"What treachery is he engaged in now?" he asked himself. "I know that look in my Horatio's eyes; and I know it always means mischief."

George Sheldon made his appearance at the Lawn five minutes after his brother came home from the City. He entered on the domestic circle in his usual free-and-easy manner, knowing himself to be endured, rather than liked, by the two ladies, and to be only tolerated as a necessary evil by the master of the house.

"I've dropped in to eat a chop with you, Phil," he said, "in order to get an hour's comfortable talk after dinner. There's no saying half-a-dozen consecutive words to you in the City, where your clerks seem to spend their lives in bouncing in upon you when you don't want them."

There was very little talk during dinner. Charlotte and her stepfather were thoughtful. Diana was chiefly employed in listening to the

sotto voce inanities of Mrs. Sheldon, for whom the girl showed herself admirably patient. Her forbearance and gentleness towards Georgy constituted a kind of penitential sacrifice, by which she hoped to atone for the dark thoughts and bitter feelings that possessed her mind during those miserable hours in which she was obliged to witness the happiness of Charlotte and her lover.

George Sheldon devoted himself chiefly to his dinner and a certain dry sherry, which he particularly affected. He was a man who would have dined and enjoyed himself at the table of Judas Iscariot, knowing him for the traitor he was.

"That's as good a pheasant as I ever ate, Phil," he said, after winding up with a couple of legs and a wing or so. "No, Georgy; no macaroni, thanks. I don't care about kickshaws after a good dinner. Has Hawkehurst dined with you lately, by the way, Phil?"

Charlotte blushed red as the holly-berries that decorated the chandelier. It was Christmas-eve, and her own fair hands had helped to bedeck the rooms with festal garlands of evergreen and holly.

"He dines with us to-morrow," replied the stockbroker. "You'll come, I suppose, as usual, George?"

"Well, I shall be very glad, if I'm not in the way."

Georgy murmured some conventional protestation of the unfailing delight afforded to her by George's society.

"Of course we're always glad to see you," said Philip in his most genial manner; "and now, if you've anything to say to me about business, the sooner you begin the better.—You and the girls needn't stay for dessert, Georgy. Almonds and raisins can't be much of a novelty to you; and as none of you take any wine, there's not much to stop for. George and I will come in to tea."

The ladies departed, by no means sorry to return to their Berlin-wool and piano. Diana took up her work with that saintly patience with which she performed all the duties of her position; and Charlotte seated herself before the piano, and began to play little bits of waltzes, and odds and

ends of polkas, in a dreamy mood, and with a slurring over of dominant bass notes, which would have been torture to a musician's ear.

She was wondering whether Valentine would call that evening, Christmas-eve—a sort of occasion for congratulation of some kind from her lover, she fancied. It was the first Christmas-eve on which she had been "engaged." She looked back to the same period last year, and remembered herself sitting in that very room, strumming on that very piano, and unconscious that there was such a creature as Valentine Hawkehurst upon this earth. And, strange to say, even in that benighted state, she had been tolerably happy.

"Now, George," said Mr. Sheldon, when the brothers had filled their glasses and planted their chairs on the opposite sides of the hearth-rug, "what's the nature of this business that you want to talk about?"

"Well, it is a business of considerable importance, in which you are only indirectly con-

cerned. The actual principal in the affair is your stepdaughter, Miss Halliday."

"Indeed!"

"Yes. You know how you have always ridiculed my fancy for hunting up heirs-at-law and all that kind of thing, and you know how I have held on, hoping against hope, starting on a new scent when the old scent failed, and so on."

"And you have got a chance at last, eh?"

"I believe that I have, and a tolerably good one; and I think you will own that it is rather extraordinary that my first lucky hit should bring luck your way."

"That is to say, to my stepdaughter?" remarked Mr. Sheldon, without any appearance of astonishment.

"Precisely," said George, somewhat disconcerted by his brother's coolness. "I have lately discovered that Miss Halliday is entitled to a certain sum of money, and I pledge myself to put her in possession of that money—on one condition."

"And that is—"

"That she executes a deed promising to give me half of the amount she may recover by my agency."

"Suppose she can recover it without your agency?"

"That I defy her to do. She does not even know that she has any claim to the amount in question."

"Don't be too sure of that. Or even supposing she knows nothing, do you think her friends are as ignorant as she is? Do you think me such a very bad man of business as to remain all this time unaware of the fact that my stepdaughter, Charlotte Halliday, is next of kin to the Rev. John Haygarth, who died intestate, at Tilford Haven, in Kent, about a year ago?"

This was a cannon-shot that almost knocked George Sheldon off his chair; but after that first movement of surprise, he gave a sigh, or almost a groan, expressive of resignation.

"Egad, Phil Sheldon," he said, "I ought not to be astonished at this. Knowing you as well as I do, I must have been a confounded fool not

to expect some kind of underhand work from you."

"What do you mean by underhand work?" exclaimed Mr. Sheldon. "The same newspapers that were open to you were open to me, and I had better opportunities for tracking my stepdaughter's direct descent from John Haygarth's father."

"How did you discover Miss Halliday's descent from Matthew Haygarth?" asked George very meekly. He was quite crestfallen. He began to feel that his brother would have the upper hand of him in this business as in all other business of this world.

"That is my secret," replied Mr. Sheldon with agreeable tranquillity of manner. "You have kept your secrets, and I shall keep mine. Your policy has been the policy of distrust. Mine shall be the same. When you were starting this affair, I offered to go into it with you—to advance whatever money you needed, in a friendly manner. You declined my offer, and chose to go in for the business on your own hook. You have made a very good thing for yourself, no doubt; but

you are not quite clever enough to keep me altogether in the dark in a matter which concerns a member of my own family."

"Yes," said George, with a sigh, "that's where you hold the winning cards. Miss Halliday is your ace of trumps."

"Depend upon it I shall know how to hold my strength in reserve, and when to play my leading trump."

"And how to collar my king," muttered George between his set teeth.

"Come," exclaimed Philip presently, "we may as well discuss this matter in a friendly spirit. What do you mean to propose?"

"I have only one proposition to make," answered the lawyer with decision. "I hold every link of the chain of evidence, without which Miss Halliday might as well be a native of the Fiji Islands for any claim she can assert to John Haygarth's estate. I am prepared to carry this matter through; but I will only do it on the condition that I receive half the fortune recovered from the Crown by Miss Halliday."

"A very moderate demand, upon my word!"

"I daresay I shall be able to make my bargain with Miss Halliday."

"Very likely," replied Mr. Sheldon; "and I shall be able to get that bargain set aside as illegal."

"I doubt that. I have a deed of agreement drawn up here which would hold water in any court of equity."

And hereupon Mr. Sheldon the younger produced and read aloud one of those dryasdust documents by which the legal business of life is carried on. It was a deed to be executed by Charlotte Halliday, spinster, of Bayswater, on the one part, and George Sheldon, solicitor, of Gray's Inn, on the other part; and it gave to the said George Sheldon, as securely as any deed can give anything, one half of any property, not now in her possession or control, which the said Charlotte Halliday might obtain by the agency of the above-mentioned George Sheldon.

"And pray, who is to find the costs for this business?" asked the stockbroker. "I don't feel

by any means disposed to stake my money on such a hazardous game. Who knows what other descendants of Matthew Haygarth may be playing at hide-and-seek in the remotest corners of the earth, ready to spring out upon us when we've wasted a small fortune upon law-proceedings?"

"I sha'n't ask you to risk your money," replied George, with sullen dignity. "I have friends who will back me when they see that agreement executed."

"Very well, then. All you have to do is to alter your half share to one-fifth, and I will undertake that Miss Halliday shall sign the agreement before the week is out."

"One-fifth?"

"Yes, my dear George. Twenty thousand pounds will pay you very handsomely for your trouble. I cannot consent to Miss Halliday ceding more than a fifth."

"A fig for your consent! The girl is of age, and can act upon her own hook. I shall go to Miss Halliday herself," exclaimed the indignant lawyer.

"O no, you won't. You must know the danger of running counter to me in this business. That agreement is all very well; but there is no kind of document more easy to upset if one only goes about it in the right way. Play your own game, and I will upset that agreement, as surely as I turn this wine-glass bowl downwards."

Mr. Sheldon's action and Mr. Sheldon's look expressed a determination which George knew how to estimate by the light of past experience.

"It is a hard thing to find you against me, after the manner in which I have toiled and slaved for your stepdaughter's interests."

"I am bound to hold my stepdaughter's interests paramount over every consideration."

"Yes, paramount over brotherly feeling and all that sort of thing. I say that it is more than hard that you should be against me, considering the special circumstances and the manner in which I have kept my own counsel—"

"You will take a fifth share, or nothing, George," said Mr. Sheldon, with a threatening contraction of his black brows. "If I have any

difficulty in arranging matters with you, I will go into this affair myself, and carry it through without your help."

"That I defy you to do."

"You had better not defy me."

"Pray how much do you expect to get out of Miss Halliday's fortune?" demanded the aggravated George, with angry abruptness.

"That is my business," answered Philip quietly. "And now we had better go into the drawing-room for our tea. O, by the bye, George," he added with delightful carelessness, "as Miss Halliday is quite a child in all business matters, she had better be treated like a child. I shall tell her that she has a claim to a certain sum of money; but I shall not tell her what sum. Her disappointment will be less in the event of a failure, if her expectations are not large."

"You are always so considerate, my dear Phil," said George with a malignant grin. "May I ask how it is you have taken it into your head to play the benevolent father in the matter of Valentine Hawkehurst and Miss Halliday?"

"What can it matter to me whom my step-daughter marries?" asked Philip coolly. "Of course I wish her well; but I will not have the responsibility of controlling her choice. If this young man suits her, let her marry him."

"Especially when he happens to suit you so remarkably well. I think I can understand your tactics, Phil."

"You must understand or misunderstand me, just as you please. And now come to tea."

CHAPTER VIII.

CHRISTMAS PEACE.

Valentine Hawkehurst did not make his appearance at the Lawn on Christmas-eve. He devoted that evening to the service of his old ally. He performed all friendly offices for the departing Captain, dined with him very pleasantly in Regent-street, and accompanied him to the London-bridge terminus, where he beheld the voyager comfortably seated in a second-class carriage of the night-train for Newhaven.

Mr. Hawkehurst had seen the Captain take a through ticket for Rouen, and he saw the train leave the terminus. This he held to be ocular demonstration of the fact that Captain Paget was really going to the Gallic Manchester.

"That sort of customer is so uncommonly slippery," the young man said to himself as he left the station, "nothing but the evidence of my

own eyes would have convinced me of my friend's departure. How pure and fresh the London atmosphere seems now that the perfume of Horatio Paget is out of it! I wonder what he is going to do at Rouen? Very little good, I daresay. But why should I wonder about him, or trouble myself about him? He is gone, and I have set myself free from the trammels of the past."

The next day was Christmas-day. Mr. Hawkehurst recited scraps of Milton's glorious hymn as he made his morning toilet. He was very happy. It was the first Christmas morning on which he had ever awakened with this sense of supreme happiness, or with the consciousness that the day was brighter, or grander, or more holy than other days. It seemed to him to-day, more than ever, that he was indeed a regenerate creature, purified by the influence of a good woman's love.

He looked back at his past existence, and the vision of many Christmas-days arose before him: a Christmas in Paris, amidst unutterable rain and mud—a Christmas-night spent in roaming the

boulevards and in the consumption of cognac and tobacco at a third-rate café; a Christmas in Germany; more than one Christmas in the Queen's Bench; one especially dreary Christmas in a long bare ward at Whitecross-street;—how many varied scenes and changing faces arose before his mental vision associated with that festive time! And yet among them all there was not one on which there shone the faintest glimmer of that holy light which makes the common holiday a sacred season.

It was a pleasant thing to breakfast without the society of the brilliant Horatio, whose brilliancy was apt to appear somewhat ghastly at that early period of the morning. It was pleasant to loiter over the meal, now meditating on the happy future; now dipping into a tattered copy of Southey's *Doctor*, with the consciousness that the winds and waves had by this time wafted Captain Paget to a foreign land.

Valentine was to spend the whole of Christmas-day with Charlotte and her kindred. He was to accompany them to a fashionable church in the

morning, to walk with them after church, to dine and tell ghost-stories in the evening. It was to be his first day as a recognised member of that pleasant family at Bayswater: and in the fulness of his heart he felt affectionately disposed to all his adopted relations: even to Mr. Sheldon, whose very noble conduct had impressed him strongly, in spite of the bitter sneers and covert slanders of George.

Charlotte had told her lover that her stepfather was a very generous and disinterested person, and that there was a secret which she would have been glad to tell him, had she not been pledged to hold it inviolate, that would have gone far to place Mr. Sheldon in a very exalted light before the eyes of his future son-in-law.

And then Miss Halliday had nodded and smiled, and had informed her lover, with a joyous little laugh, that he should have a horse to ride, and an edition of Grote's *Greece* bound in dark-brown calf with bevelled edges, when they were married; this work being one which the young author had of late languished to possess.

"Dear foolish Lotta, I fear there will be a new history of Greece, based on new principles, before that time comes," said the lover.

"O no, indeed; that time will come very soon. See how industriously you work, and how well you succeed. The magazine people will soon give you thirty pounds a month. Or who knows that you may not write some book that will make you suddenly famous, like Byron, or the good-natured fat little printer who wrote those long, long, long novels that no one reads nowadays?"

Influenced by Charlotte's hints about her step-father, Mr. Hawkehurst's friendly feeling for that gentleman grew stronger, and the sneers and innuendoes of the lawyer ceased to have the smallest power over him.

"The man is such a thorough-going schemer himself, that he cannot bring himself to believe in another man's honesty," thought Mr. Hawkehurst, while meditating upon his experience of the two brothers. "So far as I have had any dealings with Philip Sheldon, I have found him straightforward enough. I can imagine no hidden mo-

tive for his conduct in relation to Charlotte. The test of his honesty will be the manner in which he is acted upon by Charlotte's position as claimant of a great fortune. Will he throw me overboard, I wonder? or will my dear one believe me an adventurer and fortune-hunter? Ah, no, no, no; I do not think in all the complications of life there could come about a state of events which would cause my Charlotte to doubt me. There is no clairvoyance so unerring as true love."

Mr. Hawkehurst had need of such philosophy as this to sustain him in the present crisis of his life. He was blest with a pure delight which excelled his wildest dreams of happiness; but he was not blest with any sense of security as to the endurance of that exalted state of bliss.

Mr. Sheldon would learn Charlotte's position, would doubtless extort from his brother the history of those researches in which Valentine had been engaged; and then, what then? Alas, hereupon arose incalculable dangers and perplexities.

Might not the stockbroker, as a man of the world, take a sordid view of the whole transac-

tion, and consider Valentine in the light of a shameless adventurer, who had traded on his secret knowledge in the hope of securing a rich wife? Might he not reveal all to Charlotte, and attempt to place her lover before her in this most odious aspect? She would not believe him base; her faith would be unshaken, her love unchanged; but it was odious, it was horrible to think that her ears should be sullied, her tender heart fluttered by the mere suggestion of such baseness.

It was during the Christmas-morning sermon that Mr. Hawkehurst permitted his mind to be disturbed by these reflections. He was sitting next his betrothed, and had the pleasure of contemplating her fair girlish face, with the rosy lips half parted in reverent attention as she looked upward to her pastor.

After church there was the walk home to the Lawn; and during this rapturous promenade Valentine put away from him all shadow of doubt and fear, in order to bask in the full sunshine of his Charlotte's presence. Her pretty gloved hand rested confidingly on his arm, and

the supreme privilege of carrying a dainty blue-silk umbrella and an ivory-bound church-service was awarded him. With what pride he accepted the duty of convoying his promised wife over the muddy crossings! Those brief journeys seemed to him in a manner typical of their future lives. She was to travel dry-shod over the miry ways of this world, supported by his strong arm. How fondly he surveyed her toilet! and what a sudden interest he felt in the fashions, that had until lately seemed so vulgar and frivolous!

"I will never denounce the absurdity of those little bonnets again, Lotta," he cried; "that conglomeration of black velvet and maiden's-hair fern is divine. Do you know that in some places they call that fern Maria's hair, and hold it sacred to the mother of Him who was born to-day? so you see there is an artistic fitness in your head-dress. Yes, your bonnet is delicious, darling; and though the diminutive size of that velvet jacket would lead me to suppose you had borrowed it from some juvenile sister, it seems the very garment of all garments best calculated to render you just one

hair's-breadth nearer perfection than you were made by nature."

"Valentine, don't be ridiculous!" giggled the young lady.

"How can I help being ridiculous? Your presence acts upon my nerves like laughing-gas. Ah, you do not know what cares and perplexities I have to make me serious. Charlotte," exclaimed the young man, with sudden energy, "do you think you could ever come to distrust me?"

"Valentine! Do I think I shall ever be Queen of England? One thing is quite as likely as the other."

"My dear angel, if you will only believe in me always, there is no power upon earth that can make us unhappy. Suppose you found yourself suddenly possessed of a great fortune, Charlotte; what would you do with it?"

"I would buy you a library as good as that in the British Museum; and then you would not want to spend the *whole* of your existence in Great Russell-street."

"But if you had a great fortune, Lotta, don't you think you would be very much disposed to leave me to plod on at my desk in Great Russell-street? Possessed of wealth, you would begin to languish for position; and you would allow Mr. Sheldon to bring you some suitor who could give you a name and a rank in society worthy of an angelic creature with a hundred thousand pounds or so."

"I should do nothing of the kind. I do not care for money. Indeed, I should be almost sorry to be very rich."

"Why, dearest?"

"Because if I were very rich, we could not live in the cottage at Wimbledon, and I could not make lemon chee-e-cakes for your dinner."

"My own true-hearted darling!" cried Valentine; "the taint of worldliness can never touch your pure spirit."

They were at the gates of Mr. Sheldon's domain by this time. Diana and Georgy had walked behind the lovers, and had talked a little about the sermon, and a good deal about the bonnets; poor

Diana doing her very uttermost to feign an interest in the finery that had attracted Mrs. Sheldon's wandering gaze.

"Well, I should have thought you couldn't fail to see it," said the elder lady, as they approached the gate; "a leghorn, very small, with holly-berries and black ribbon—quite French, you know, and so stylish. I was thinking, if I had my Tuscan cleaned and altered, it might—" And here the conversation became general, as the family party entered the drawing-room, where Mr. Sheldon was reading his paper by a roaring fire.

"Talking about the bonnets, as per usual," said the stockbroker. "What an enormous amount of spiritual benefit you women must derive from church-going!—Consols have fallen another eighth since Tuesday afternoon, George," added Mr. Sheldon, addressing himself to his brother, who was standing on the hearthrug, with his elbow on the chimney-piece.

"Consols are your 'bonnets,' papa," cried Charlotte gaily; "I don't think there is a day

upon which you do not talk about their having gone up, or gone down, or gone somewhere."

After luncheon the lovers went for a walk in Kensington-gardens, with Diana Paget to play propriety.

"You will come with us, won't you, dear Di?" pleaded Charlotte. "You have been looking pale and ill lately, and I am sure a walk will do you good."

Valentine seconded his liege lady's request; and the three spent a couple of hours pacing briskly to and fro in the loneliest parts of the gardens, leaving the broad walks for the cockneys who mustered strong upon this seasonable Christmas afternoon.

For two out of those three that wintry walk was rapture only too fleeting. For the third it was passive endurance. The agonies that had but lately rent Diana's breast when she had seen those two together no longer tortured her. The scorpion sting was beginning to lose its venomous power. She suffered still, but her suffering was softened by resignation. There is a limit to the capacity

for pain in every mind. Diana had borne her share of anguish, and to those sharp throes and bitter torments there had succeeded a passive sense of sorrow that was almost peace.

"I have lost him," she said to herself. "Life can never bring me much joy; but I should be worse than weak if I spent my existence in the indulgence of my sorrow. I should be one of the vilest wretches upon this earth if I could not teach myself to witness the happiness of my friend without repining."

Miss Paget had not arrived at this frame of mind without severe struggles. Many times, in the long wakeful nights, in the slow joyless days, she had said to herself, "Peace, peace, when there was no peace." But at last the real peace, the true balm of Gilead, was given in answer to her prayers, and the weary soul tasted the sweetness of repose. She had wrestled with the demon, and had vanquished her foe.

To-day as she walked beside the lovers, and listened to their happy frivolous talk, she felt like a mother who had seen the man she loved won

from her by her own daughter, and who had resigned herself to the ruin of all her hopes for love of her child.

There was more genial laughter and pleasant converse at Mr. Sheldon's dinner-table that evening than was usual at that hospitable board; but the stockbroker himself contributed little to the merriment of the party. He was quiet, and even thoughtful, and let the talk and laughter go by him without any attempt to take part in it. After dinner he went to his own room; while Valentine and the ladies sat round the fire in the orthodox Christmas manner, and, after a good deal of discursive conversation, subsided into the telling of ghost-stories.

George Sheldon sat apart from the circle, turning over the books upon the table, or peering into a stereoscope with an evident sense of extreme weariness. This kind of domestic evening was a manner of life which Mr. Sheldon of Gray's Inn denounced as "slow;" and he submitted himself to the endurance of it this evening only because he did not know where else to bestow his presence.

"I don't think papa cares much about ghost-stories, does he, uncle George?" Charlotte asked, by way of saying something to the gentleman, who seemed so very dreary as he sat yawning over the books and stereoscopes.

"I don't suppose he does, my dear."

"And do you think he believes in ghosts?" the young lady demanded laughingly.

"No, I am sure he doesn't," replied George very seriously.

"Why, how solemnly you say that!" cried Charlotte, a little startled by George Sheldon's manner, in which there had been an earnestness not quite warranted by the occasion.

"I was thinking of your father—not my brother Phil. He died in Philip's house, you know; and if Phil believed in ghosts, he would scarcely have liked living in that house afterwards, you see, and so on. But he went on living there for a twelvemonth longer. It seemed just as good as any other house to him, I suppose."

Hereupon Georgy dissolved into tears, and

told the company how she had fled from the house in which her first husband had died immediately after the funeral.

"And I'm sure the gentlemanly manner in which your step-papa behaved during all that dreadful time, Charlotte, is beyond all praise," continued the lady, turning to her daughter; "so thoughtful, so kind, so patient. I'm sure, what I should have done if poor Tom's illness had happened in a strange house, I don't know. And I have no doubt that the new doctor, Mr. Burkham, did his duty, though his manner was not as decided as I should have wished."

"Mr. Burkham!" cried Valentine. "What Burkham is that? We've a member of the Ragamuffins called Burkham, a surgeon, who does a little in the literary line."

"The Mr. Burkham who attended my poor dear husband was a very young man," answered Georgy; "a fair man, with a fresh colour and a hesitating manner. I should have been so much better satisfied if he had been older."

"That is the man," said Valentine. "The

Burkham I know is fresh-coloured and fair, and cannot be much over thirty."

"Are you and he particularly intimate?" asked George Sheldon carelessly.

"O dear no, not at all. We speak to each other when we happen to meet—that's all. He seems a nice fellow enough; and he evidently hasn't much practice, or he couldn't afford to be a Ragamuffin, and to write farces. He looks to me exactly the kind of modest deserving man who ought to succeed, and who so seldom does."

This was all that was said about Mr. Burkham; but there was no more talk of ghost-stories, and a temporary depression fell upon the little assembly. The memory of her father had always a saddening influence on Charlotte; and it needed many tender *sotto-voce* speeches from Valentine to bring back the smiles to her fair young face.

The big electro-plated teatray and massive silver teapot made their appearance presently, and immediately after came Mr. Sheldon.

"I want to have a little talk with you after tea, Hawkehurst," he said, as he took his own cup

from Georgy's hand, and proceeded to imbibe the beverage standing. "If you will come out into the garden and have a cigar, I can say all I have to say in a very few minutes; and then we can come in here for a rubber. Georgy is a very decent player; and my brother George plays as good a rubber as any man at the Conservative or the Reform."

Valentine's heart sank within him. What could Mr. Sheldon want with a few minutes' talk, if not to revoke his gracious permission of some days before—the permission that had been accorded in ignorance of Charlotte's pecuniary advantages? The young man looked very pale as he went to smoke his cigar in Mr. Sheldon's garden: Charlotte followed him with anxious eyes, and wondered at the sudden gravity of his manner. George Sheldon also was puzzled by his brother's desire for a *tête-à-tête*.

"What new move is Phil going to make?" he asked himself.

The two men lit their cigars, and got them

well under weigh before Mr. Sheldon began to talk.

"When I gave my consent to receive you as Miss Halliday's suitor, my dear Hawkehurst," he said at last, "I told you that I was acting as very few men of the world would act, and I only told you the truth. Since giving you that consent I have made a very startling discovery, and one that places me in quite a new position with regard to this matter."

"Indeed!"

"Yes, Mr. Hawkehurst, I have become aware of the fact that Miss Halliday, the girl whom I thought entirely dependent upon my generosity, is heir-at-law to a large fortune. You will of course perceive how entirely this alters the position of affairs."

"I do perceive," Valentine answered earnestly; "but I trust you will believe that I had not the faintest idea of Miss Halliday's position when I asked her to be my wife. As to my love for her, I can scarcely tell you when that began; but I think it must have dated from the first hour in

which I saw her, for I can remember no period at which I did *not* love her."

"If I did not believe you superior to any mercenary motives, you would not have been under my roof to-day, Mr. Hawkehurst," said the stockbroker with extreme gravity. "The discovery of my stepdaughter's position gives me no pleasure. Her claim to this wealth only increases my responsibility with regard to her, and responsibility is what I would willingly avoid. After all due deliberation, therefore, I have decided that this discovery need make no alteration in your position as Charlotte's future husband. If you were worthy of her when she was without a fortune, you are not less worthy now."

"Mr. Sheldon," cried Valentine with considerable emotion, "I did not expect so much generosity at your hands!"

"No," replied the stockbroker, "the popular idea of a business man is not particularly agreeable. I do not, however, pretend to anything like generosity; I wish to take a common-sense view of the affair, but not an illiberal one."

"You have shown so much generosity of feeling, that I can no longer sail under false colours," said Valentine, after a brief pause. "Until a day or two ago I was bound to secrecy by a promise made to your brother. But his communication of Miss Halliday's rights to you sets me at liberty, and I must tell you that which may possibly cause you to withdraw your confidence."

Hereupon Mr. Hawkehurst revealed his share in the researches that had resulted in the discovery of Miss Halliday's claim to a large fortune. He entered into no details. He told Mr. Sheldon only that he had been the chief instrument in the bringing about of this important discovery.

"I can only repeat what I said just now," he added in conclusion. "I have loved Charlotte Halliday from the beginning of our acquaintance, and I declared myself some days before I discovered her position. I trust this confession will in no wise alter your estimate of me."

"It would be a poor return for your candour if I were to doubt your voluntary statement, Hawkehurst," answered the stockbroker. "No;

I shall not withdraw my confidence. And if your researches should ultimately lead to the advancement of my stepdaughter, there will be only poetical justice in your profiting more or less by that advancement. In the mean time we cannot take matters too quietly. I am not a sanguine person, and I know how many hearts have been broken by the High Court of Chancery. This grand discovery of yours may result in nothing but disappointment and waste of money, or it may end as pleasantly as my brother and you seem to expect. All I ask is, that poor Charlotte's innocent heart may not be tortured by a small lifetime of suspense. Let her be told nothing that can create hope in the present or disappointment in the future. She appears to be perfectly happy in her present position, and it would be worse than folly to disturb her by vague expectations that may never be realised. She will have to make affidavits, and so on, by and by, I daresay; and when that time comes she must be told there is some kind of suit pending in which she is concerned. But she need not be told how nearly

that suit concerns her, or the extent of her alleged claim. You see, my dear sir, I have seen so much of this sort of thing, and the misery involved in it, that I may be forgiven if I am cautious."

This was putting the whole affair in a new light. Until this moment Valentine had fancied that, the chain of evidence once established, Charlotte's claim had only to be asserted in order to place her in immediate possession of the Haygarth estate. But Mr. Sheldon's cool and matter-of-fact discussion of the subject implied all manner of doubt and difficulty, and the Haygarthian thousands seemed carried away to the most remote and shadowy regions of Chanceryland, as by the waves of some legal ocean.

"And you really think it would be better not to tell Charlotte?"

"I am sure of it. If you wish to preserve her from all manner of worry and annoyance, you will take care to keep her in the dark until the affair is settled — supposing it ever should be settled. I have known such an affair to outlast the person interested."

"You take a very despondent view of the matter."

"I take a practical view of it. My brother George is a monomaniac on the next-of-kin subject."

"I cannot quite reconcile myself to the idea of concealing the truth from Charlotte."

"That is because you do not know the world as well as I do," answered Mr. Sheldon coolly.

"I cannot imagine that the idea of this claim would have any disturbing influence upon her," Valentine argued thoughtfully. "She is the last person in the world to care about money."

"Perhaps so. But there is a kind of intoxication in the idea of a large fortune—an intoxication that no woman of Charlotte's age could stand against. Tell her that she has a claim to considerable wealth, and from that moment she will count upon the possession of that wealth, and shape all her plans for the future upon that basis. 'When I get my fortune, I will do this, that, and the other.' *That* is what she will be continually saying to herself; and by and by, when the affair

results in failure, as it very likely will, there will remain a sense of disappointment which will last for a lifetime, and go far to embitter all the ordinary pleasures of Charlotte's existence."

"I am inclined to think you are right," said Valentine, after some little deliberation. "My darling girl is perfectly happy as it is. It may be wisest to tell her nothing."

"I am quite sure of that," replied Mr. Sheldon. "Of course her being enlightened or not can be in no way material to me. It is a subject upon which I can afford to be entirely disinterested."

"I will take your advice, Mr. Sheldon."

"So be it. In that case matters will remain *in statu quo*. You will be received in this house as my stepdaughter's future husband, and it is an understood thing that your marriage is not to take place without due consultation with me. I am to have a voice in the business."

"Most decidedly. It is only right that you should be deferred to."

This brought the interview to a close very

pleasantly. The gentlemen went back to the house, and Valentine found himself presently seated at a whist-table with the brothers Sheldon, and Georgy, who played very well, in a feeble kind of way, holding religiously by all the precepts of Hoyle, and in evident fear of her husband and brother-in-law. Charlotte and Diana played duets while the whist progressed, with orthodox silence and solemnity on the part of the four players. Valentine's eyes wandered very often to the piano, and he was in no wise sorry when the termination of a conquering rubber set him at liberty. He contrived to secure a brief *tête-à-tête* with his Charlotte while he helped her in the arrangement of the books on the music-stand, and then the shrill chime of the clock on the mantelpiece, and an audible yawn from Philip Sheldon, told him that he must go.

"Providence has been very good to us," he said in an under tone, as he bade Miss Halliday good-night. "Your stepfather's conduct is all that is kind and thoughtful, and there is not a cloud upon our future. Good-night, and God

bless you, my dearest! I think I shall always consider this my first Christmas-day. I never knew till to-day how sweet and holy this anniversary can be."

He walked to Cumberland-gate in company with George Sheldon, who preserved a sulky gravity, which was by no means agreeable.

"You have chosen your own course," he said at parting, "and I only hope the result may prove your wisdom. But, as I think I may have remarked before, you don't know my brother Phil as well as I do."

"Your brother has behaved with such extreme candour and good feeling towards me, that I would really rather not hear any of your unpleasant innuendoes against him. I hate that 'I could an if I would' style of talk, and while I occupy my present position in your brother's house I cannot consent to hear anything to his discredit."

"That's a very tall animal you've taken to riding lately, my friend Hawkehurst," said George, "and when a man rides the high horse with me I always let him have the benefit of his *monture*.

You have served yourself without consideration for me, and I shall not trouble myself in the future with any regard for you or your interests. But if harm ever comes to you or yours, through my brother Philip, remember that I warned you. Good-night."

In Charlotte's room the cheery little fire burned late upon that frosty night, while the girl sat in her dressing-gown dreamily brushing her soft brown hair, and meditating upon the superhuman merits and graces in her lover.

It was more than an hour after the family had retired, when there came a cautious tapping at Charlotte's door. "It is only I, dear," said a low voice; and before Charlotte could answer, the door was opened, and Diana came in, and went straight to the hearth, by which her friend was sitting.

"I am so wakeful to-night, Lotta," she said; "and the light under your door tempted me to come in for a few minutes' chat."

"My dearest Di, you know how glad I always am to see you."

"Yes, dear, I know that you are only too good to me—and I have been so wayward, so ungracious. O, Charlotte, I know my coldness has wounded you during the last few months."

"I have been just a little hurt now and then, dear, when you have seemed not to care for me, or to sympathise with me in all my joys and sorrows; but then it has been selfish of me to expect so much sympathy, and I know that, if your manner is cold, your heart is noble."

"No, Lotta, it is not noble. It is a wicked heart."

"Diana!"

"Yes," said Miss Paget, kneeling by her friend's chair, and speaking with suppressed energy; "it has been a wicked heart, wicked because your happiness has been torture to it."

"Diana!"

"O, my dearest one, do not look at me with those innocent, wondering eyes. You will hate me, perhaps, when you know all. O, no, no, no, you will not hate—you will pity and forgive me. I loved him, dear; he was my companion, my

only friend; and there was a time—long ago—before he had ever seen your face, when I fancied that he cared for me, and would get to love me—as I loved him—unasked, uncared for. O, Charlotte, you can never know what I have suffered. It is not in your nature to comprehend what such a woman as I can suffer. I loved him so dearly, I clung so wickedly, so madly to my old hopes, my old dreams, long after they had become the falsest hopes, the wildest dreams that ever had power over a distracted mind. But, my darling, it is past, and I come to you on this Christmas night to tell you that I have conquered my stubborn heart, and that from this time forward there shall be no cloud between you and me."

"Diana, my dear friend, my poor girl!" cried Charlotte, quite overcome, "you loved him, you—as well as I—and I have robbed you of his heart!"

"No, Charlotte, it was never mine."

"You loved him—all the time you spoke so harshly of him!"

"When I seemed most harsh, I loved him

most. But do not look at me with such distress in your sweet face, my dear. I tell you that the worst pain is past and gone. The rest is very easy to bear, and to outlive. These things do not last for ever, Charlotte, whatever the poets and novelists may tell us. If I had not lived through the worst, I should not be here to-night, with your arm round my neck and his name upon my lips. I have never wished you joy until to-night, Charlotte, and now for the first time I can wish you all good things, in honesty and truth. I have conquered myself. I do not say that to me Valentine Hawkehurst can ever be quite what other men are. I think that to the end of my life there will be a look in his face, a tone of his voice, that will touch me more deeply than any other look or tone upon earth; but my love for you has overcome my love for him, and there is no hidden thought in my mind to-night, as I sit here at your feet, and pray for God's blessing on your choice."

"My darling Diana, I know not how to thank you, how to express my faith and my love."

"I doubt if I am worthy of your love, dear;

but, with God's help, I will be worthy of your trust; and if ever there should come a day in which my love can succour or my devotion serve you, there shall be no lack of either. Listen, dear; there are the waits playing the sweet Christmas hymn. Do you remember what Shakespeare says about the 'bird of dawning' singing all night long, and how no evil spirit roams abroad at this dear season,

'So hallowed and so gracious is the time'?

I have conquered my evil spirit, Lotta, and there shall be peace and true love between us for evermore, shall there not, dearest friend?"

And thus ends the story of Diana Paget's girlish love—the love that had grown up in secret, to be put away from her heart in silence, and buried with the dead dreams and fancies that had fostered it. For her to-night the romance of life closed for ever. For Charlotte the sweet story was newly begun, and the opening chapters were very pleasant—the mystic volume seemed all delight. Blessed with her lover's devotion, her mo-

ther's approval, and even Mr. Sheldon's benign approbation, what more could she ask from Providence—what lurking dangers could she fear—what storm-cloud could she perceive upon the sunlit heavens?

There was a cloud, no bigger than a man's hand, but the harbinger of tempest and terror. It yet remains to be shown what form that cloud assumed, and from what quarter the tempest came. The history of Charlotte Halliday has grown upon the writer; and the completion of that history, with the fate of John Haygarth's fortune, will be told under the title of

CHARLOTTE'S INHERITANCE.

END OF VOL. III.

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